

*The
Photograph*

As

A

Site

Of

Writing

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ABSTRACT

This research project considers the photograph as a common space, a space of encounter that unsettles the relations between word and image. It calls for a thinking of the photograph alongside notions of commonality at a time of increasing fragmentation and alienation in terms of what is communicable. The project is driven by different forms of description as a methodology and mode of enquiry. These methods of description constitute a series of experiments in writing and photography. They are presented in the thesis as image and text works and accompanying the thesis as an installation of photographic works and composition of voice recordings.

The context of the research engages practices of space and everyday life along side ideas about community and commonality. Methods of description draw out the relationship between word and image, examining different particularities between writing as image and the construction of photographic sequences as a visual syntax in order to question the limits of description in relation to the photographic image and human encounter.

The process of research is framed within a series of on-going conversations that embed themselves within thinking about and making photographs. Sitting on park benches and considering the space of *The Look* and the work Jean-Paul Sartre, converses with a series of photographs and writings that describe a space of human encounter. The description of Charles Bovary's Hat in the opening sequence of *Madame Bovary*¹ by Gustave Flaubert, informs a descriptive method and thinking about the photograph as a kind of mute or stuttering face. A dialogue with Walker Evan's Labor Anonymous photographs emerges through experimental forms of writing and cropping. This concludes in a series of 150 sentences and photographic fragments that cover the entirety of the photographs in the Labor Anonymous archive, replacing editing with a process of cropping in order to approach an anonymous space within the photographic image. The thesis ends with photographs of discarded piles of organic matter constructed through a rigorous method of writing drawn out of the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas and a reading of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Francis Ponges. Here the photograph is presented as an exhausted site where word and image exist alongside each other, radically passive, together — apart.

Making a series of voice recordings enables an exploration of the incommensurability of word and image approaching problems surrounding a thinking of *the face*, and the *face-to-face* encounter through the photograph. Throughout the project a problem of pronouns is evoked, an uncomfortable sense of the relations between us all in looking and thinking about the space of the image and how it can be constituted and conveyed. Processes of description developed through the different forms of enquiry call us to the urgent task of considering the photographic image as a site of commonality and a space of community.

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¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lydia Davies (London, Penguin, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

*'...Linguistically, the author is nothing but the one who writes, just as I is nothing but the one who says I: language knows a "subject", not a "person", and this subject, empty outside of the very speech-act which defines it, suffices to "hold" language, i.e. to exhaust it.'*¹

The thesis weaves together examples² of my writing and photographs with moments from literature, photography and philosophy. I move between different modes of thinking and form conversations that approach the photograph as a question of encounter and relation between word and image. These conversations are experiments in thinking about how a photograph can relate to writing. My approach draws its method from empiricism and phenomenology. My motive stems from the desire to consider the communicability of the image as a space between beings. The thesis is accompanied by a series of works that present another side or face to the research. What is read in the thesis may be heard outside of it and what is written may be shown.

From the CIRCLE of the EYE to the LINE of sight, there is a relation between writing, speaking and seeing.

I will introduce the work through elements and qualities that arise from it. I hope that the research remains open in this respect, as in a circle.

I remember... a long time ago as this project was beginning to take shape in my head I used to go out and walk in various directions, following a compass in an attempt to get lost. On one of these walks I overheard a woman speaking to a medium sized dog, she asked: 'what are you looking for? Something to chase?' It is a phrase that reverberates in my mind and has formed into a kind of framework for my thinking about what research might be, essentially an attempt to find something to chase, echoed in Roland Barthes' 'Research, The Young'³, and in Maurice Blanchot's 'The Infinite Conversation'⁴, it is a quest and questioning activity that seems to go around in a circle chasing its tail somewhat and always slightly out of kilter and in disarray. It is in this spirit of research that I speak.

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1989) p.51.

² 'The idea that an example gives is the thing beside itself exposed in its own coming-into-being-known; and shown as what it can be, it is a thing exposed to its possibilities.' Yve Lomax, *Passionate Being, Language, Singularity and Perseverance* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2010) p.91.

³ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1989) p.72.

⁴ 'I would like to know what you are searching for... To find, to search for, to turn, to go around: yes, these are words indicating movement, but always circular. It is as though the sense of searching or research lay in its necessary inflection in turning.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: university of Minnesotan Press, 1993) p.26.

DESCRIPTION

Thus the theory of description matters most.

It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,

The buzzing world and lisping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,

In which nothing solid is its solid self.⁵

Through looking and thinking about looking, this work proposes that research as a process is radically uncertain. I propose that description is necessary as a state of being and that radical uncertainty requires description. This stems from a question of how a photograph can take place, or indeed how any kind of looking and thinking about looking takes place. I have placed myself in different positions and developed a range of methods for making, writing, drawing and thinking about the space of the photograph. I have undertaken a series of experiments in writing and looking that take shape around examples⁶ from literature and photography.

Important references in terms of description are: George Perec's *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*⁷, a 3 day long exercise in writing in the place of a photograph, or of recording what happens, when nothing in particular is happening. Flaubert's descriptions and the descriptive writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Francis Ponges are also important. In Flaubert it is the insistence on detailed description above narrative action or dialogue, in particular the use of the imperfect tense, invoking a sense of timelessness that I am drawn to. Lydia Davies quotes Flaubert in saying 'I maintain that images are action'⁸. As if in place of narrative a description of images can occur. Davies notes that Flaubert's rigor is surprisingly lacking in his use of pronouns, which are often unclearly attributed. Again, this interests me in particular the sense of anonymity in relation to pronouns and description, this anonymity being the thing that we have in common.

ENCOUNTER

Within my writing 'I' takes on the position of an anonymous subject and moves into a space of encounter between word and image, between you and me.

I am thinking about encounter in terms of the daily meeting or passing by of people and faces. In this respect I am influenced by Emmanuel Levinas' description of the face-to-face encounter as prior to being and as the foundation of ethical relations. His version of phenomenology is important to me due to its insistence on description as a method for considering the possibility of ethical thought. Also that language emerges out of response and description.

Anonymity is a quality of encounter, in order to encounter something, I am drawn out of my anonymity, I am anonymous towards another. The work considers the space of the photographic image as an anonymous space and site of encounter, between the photographic moment and the physical, material photograph that occurs afterwards. I draw out this space through exhaustive systems of writing and looking and processes of printing that enable an expanded time of encounter.

I wonder about what the qualities of an encounter are, in the archive, in the photographic image, in words and in the voice. Affective moments of encounter with the work of others has articulated my own work, moments with Jean-Paul Sartre, Gustave Flaubert, George Perec, Francis Ponges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett and Lydia Davies to name a few. It is through these encounters and my articulation of them that I weave this project together.

⁵ Wallace Stevens, 'Description Without Place', in *Stevens Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997) p.296.

⁶ The example as thought in Giorgio Agamben, is in the midst, as, draws out of the mass to be seen. The example is contingent, empirical and uncertain. It is aside other possibilities. The example presents a face to be seen. It is an expression.

⁷ George Perec, *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge MA: Wakefield Press, 2010)

⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lydia Davies (London: Penguin, 2010)

BENCH — PAVEMENT — ALLOTMENT

The locations I have worked in all determine different kinds of encounter. They provide a viewpoint, a position, a frame. They provide a way for the work to take place as slowness and separation. I take a place within the movement of daily life, as part of it but at a remove, not hidden but exposed. Pavements, benches, allotments all provide positions from which to look and be looked at.

The work began in allotments, thinking literally about common space and commonality, reading Jean-Luc Nancy and considering notions of community. I then moved into the park, a more public space that articulates a certain kind of encounter as expressed in the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre around *The Look*, in Henri Lefebvre's late writing on everyday life and in the work of George Perec. I then moved onto the pavement and into the movement of daily life. The dynamic of this space was important in thinking about the face-to-face encounter that Levinas describes in attempting to explore the possibilities of the photograph as a space between beings.

The specificity of the location arose after much experimentation.⁹ I concluded that my locality was important, as a space of daily life, and not of spectacle.¹⁰ I am not attempting to be a voyeur, or a flaneur, but to be visible and exposed. The person that stands still in the street or sits too long on a bench starts to stand out and gently resist the movement and speed of daily life. I think of Sartre and Beckett, a kind of absurd insistence that occupies an everyday place to the point of exhaustion, about descriptions of figures attempting to walk for example. Enacting a kind of inability to move.

TIME

The time of this work is constructed of processes and encounters that interweave between themselves. The structures I have developed for writing and making photographs are extensive, exhaustive and precise. I develop processes of repetition and fragmentation. I think of Samuel Beckett's description of sucking stones.¹¹

Highly structured systems of time, the length of a PhD, the length of a medium format film, the length of time it is possible to sit on a park bench or stand on a pavement articulate slowness, delay and extension, shifting between processes, assertively uncertain about where they will end up. Writing becomes a photograph, photographs become phrases, drawings and extended writings become spoken words, each providing ways of looking: close up, overlapping: fragments: expanded and condensed. Each element of the work has navigated these processes to end up where they are, in relation to each other. Often it has been in the relation between processes that a particular articulation has occurred. For example, in trying to write about our relation to a photographic image through the use of pronouns I started to crop and print and look and through this kind of looking I started to write again, short phrases, sentences, learning through printing and writing about the significance of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of these relations and my expression.

⁹ 'I am content with the aspect this corner of the world... I enjoy this world of things as pure elements, as qualities without support, without substance.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p137.

¹⁰ Many elements forming the history of Brixton converge in the site that I work, for example: the birth of electricity, one of the first cinemas in London, a tribute to the Windrush Generation, and the rebuilding of the Black Cultural Archives.

¹¹ 'I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yet, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally between my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my great-coat, which I replaces by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones'. Samuel Beckett *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1976) p.64.

THE VOICE

*To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth
Of human things, that is acutest speech.*¹²

I remember, ever since starting to write I spoke. It took me a long time to be able to read and enjoy reading. I read painfully slowly, and so I wrote and spoke before I could confidently read. I always read my writing out loud repeatedly in order to edit it. I am sure this is a common activity but I am interested to read about Flaubert's practice of shouting his texts, his 'gueloir'. It is of course not a coincidence that a work so influenced by Flaubert's writing style should end up being, not shouted, but softly spoken, and I have not sought to clarify the texts but to weave them together and confuse them, allowing fragments to emerge, as though looking at the details of a photograph. Speaking the written word has always been an essential part of understanding thinking about the form and meaning of writing and this is a space that I am interested in developing in relation to description and the photographic image, it pushes the speaker and the listener outside of themselves, into a space between themselves and between word and image.¹³

In writing about the image Gilles Deleuze expresses the separation between visual and audio image, saying that the voice comes from 'the other side of the image', adding that, 'what speech utters is also the invisible that sight sees only through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech'.¹⁴ I consider that the relation between word and image lies in their incommensurability, which can only be expressed in the space of the voice.

FRAGMENTS

The 150 sentences contained within this thesis relate to details of re-printed photographs that play with completeness and cover the totality of this area of the Walker Evans archive. The work moves between digital and analogue photography, between words and photographs, between fragments and complete expressions. I construct sentences and phrases. I respond to Walker Evans' edit by looking closely at the archive, available to everyone who has an Internet connection, through the Metropolitan Museum of Art website. I decisively do not visit the archive in person, but through the screen of my computer, through the digital archive that provides a space simultaneously conveying all other possible images, the mass of images that so saturates out contemporary visual experience. I have worked to achieve a hybrid grain that exposes both the digital file and the grain of the film. I include all of the photographed figures. In the place of editing and cutting out entirely, I crop. The cropping process is an intimate one, it is tender and intrusive, it is physical. As we move towards a body we encounter a fragmented view that is intimate but also brutal. Through this form of looking I bring the elements of the bodies together, both heightening and removing their individuation between each other and between you and me.

I consider the relation between suggestive phrases and complete sentences. A question is a fragment, my title is a fragment, my writing consists of fragments woven together. However, the photographs I have made more clearly operate in the space of the sentence. 12 elements evoke the length of a sentence phonetically, and the twelve-tone technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg. The sequences of photographs evoke sentences building up towards a paragraph. The graphic elements and forms within the sentences evoke syntax and grammar, adding intonation and structure. The photograph is expanded, a repeated gesture or encounter is expanded outwards across a line, stretching to form a sentence, an interference with time and space, suggesting a line of sight in opposition to the circle, the eye, the aperture and the lens.

This work emerged out of a frustration with trying to express in more theoretical / philosophical language the relations between us when viewing a photograph, the problem of pronouns. In turning away from that writing towards looking, cropping and a new form of writing I felt able to express this relation as research practice.

The voices you hear in the exhibition accompanying the thesis speak sentences¹⁵ but they are interrupted and overlapping, they weave together and enter the space of the photographs. The combination of these works considers the relation between speech and writing, the sentence and the body. Our bodies speaking over past bodies, photographs surrounded by the body of the voice, bodies suspended along a line as in a sentence, that then move to encircle our thought.

¹² Wallace Stevens, 'Chocorua to Its Neighbor', in *Stevens Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997) p.263.

¹³ 'The voice does not let itself be drawn forth following the simple and homogenous line required by a progressive writing, it gathers work in the original space that would be proper to it'. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: university of Minnesota Press, 1993) p.260.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum Books, 2012) p.245, 250.

¹⁵ 'Speech first found community by giving, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing. The given is the work of the sentence.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.98.

SARTRE IN THE PARK

We begin where I began: sitting on a park bench, wondering about how a photograph might take place. I consider the bench as an apparatus that frames space and constructs a certain type of encounter and in doing so I write and reflect. I encounter Jean–Paul Sartre across the way and am aware of the shadow of his look. I attempt to photograph the last gesture or moment of contact between beings. I start to write in the place of the photograph.

CHARLES' HAT

I work in the street to construct photographs that directly face their subject, in doing so I consider the relation between myself, the subject of the photograph and space of the image. This work takes time as I move between different locations and adopt different methods for structuring the images. I consider the photograph as a space of encounter and what the face of the photograph might be. I read examples of description, returning to the description of *Charles' Hat* in the opening of *Madame Bovary*. I describe the photographs in detail as a way of reflecting on the relation between word and image and attempt to replace or cover over the photograph with words. I make recordings of these words, read by the voice of another.

LABOR ANONYMOUS

I look, closely, at Labor Anonymous, Walker Evan's photographs that appear in *Fortune Magazine* in 1946. They become increasingly insistent as I work between these photographs and my own, considering their time and our relations. I move between writing in response to Evan's photographs and developing my own photographic sequence that takes the form of a sentence. I consider the role of pronouns in describing the photographs. I describe them all, and I crop them, looking closely at the detail, the qualities of the image.

A HEAP, A PILE, A MASS

Finally, I invite you to read, alongside me, sections from Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Snapshots*¹⁶. I think about how photographic qualities are evoked in his use of description. In response I make and describe photographs of constructions of discarded organic matter in a local allotment and consider the process of constructing a description. I present these texts and photographs alongside each other, image beside text in equal measure.

DEFINITIONS

IMAGE

Throughout this thesis I talk about the *image*. I consider it as a space of encounter and a construction that puts words and the photographic process under pressure. My understanding of what an image can be stems from an ongoing question of looking and thinking about meaning and how it can be conveyed. I do not offer a definition of the term but consider it as a position that exerts a force — a memory of an encounter, passed by and yet always present in my thinking. I find it in Samuel Beckett's description of stone sucking. I find it is Charles' Bovary's Hat. I find it in Francis Ponge. I occasionally find it in a detail of a photograph. I consider the image as radically passive, as an elemental force that brings into question relations and subjectivity. It is exhausted. I am exhausted in relation to it. This is its passivity. In the light of this I return repeatedly to look and to write.

ENCOUNTER

I also repeatedly return to the term *encounter*. There is a relation between encountering an image and encountering another and both of these experiences relate to your position and my own. I attempt to speak my own words and fail: I am mute. I place my words in the voice of another in order that you might hear them. Through my photographs I gesture towards you. Through language, through communication and the effort to write and to speak, an encounter occurs. Between these things, between you and me, an encounter occurs.

16 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morrissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000).

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Jessica Potter, March 2013

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and to Becky for talking and listening and thinking.



SARTRE IN THE PARK

WRITING IN THE PLACE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPHS OF FIGURES

VIEWS FROM PARK BENCHES

THE LOOK, A CONVERSATION WITH JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

WRITING IN THE PLACE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

The following pieces of writing and photographs were made whilst trying to think about writing in the place of a photograph. I am sitting on a bench in a park or a public square. They are influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's description of *The Look* in *Being and Nothingness*¹ and sections of observation from *Nausea*². George Perec was also in mind, in particular his short book: *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*³. I look for locations, searching for a site where I might sit and watch, thinking about public spaces and the different kinds of encounter they offer. I begin in *Lucas Gardens*, a small park next to the A road that cuts through the centre of Camberwell, London.

17.11.2006
LUCAS GARDENS

I can hear the city: cars and planes are high pitched, reversals and crossings sound and then move off.

I can hear the wind and the leaves are falling, they move across the ground.

It is both cold and warm and there are not many people around.

A man next to me is sitting with legs bent and placed together.

He has just tapped his right foot; it is the first movement in a while.

He is partly obscured by a hedge. He is wearing a beige jacket and a cap.

Others are standing under a tree across the way, one is younger and one is older.

The older one has removed her hat and shaken her hair out.

They are gathered around the tree gesturing towards it and looking at the leaves.

Different branches move in different ways due to their shape and density.

They stand around the tree talking and making gestures. The older one has put her hat back on and they look at the tree again from a different angle.

Many leaves cross my path in a hurry.

The man next to me lifts his right leg, he does it again. I can only see his feet. The rest of him is hidden by the hedge. I look back and the couple by the tree have gone.

Suddenly, the man next to me has spat on the ground.

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000).

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldwick (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

³ George Perec, *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge MA: Wakefield Press, 2010).

I sit in Windrush Square, the central square in Brixton where I live. It offers a pause within the centre of the town, between the busy traffic intersection and the Library, Cinema and Tube. Opposite is a large Church and across six lanes of traffic is the Town Hall. I sit on a bench in the square.

4.3.2007
WINDRUSH SQUARE

It is windy.
A woman across the square is sitting on a wall eating her lunch.
A ticket inspector walks past.
A pigeon is at my feet.
There is a mother and a baby on the right. They keep running around.
A man in a suit is going into the library.
The wind has dropped.
A group of people are sitting across the way and going through their bags. One of them has started to eat a peach. They rustle around and now they all have peaches. One of them has spat some peach out. She is sitting leaning on her knees. She has tapped her friend on the shoulder.
A man walks past wearing a hat with a walk that makes him look like he is dancing.
A man with a motorbike hat on is going through the bins.
An ant is crawling across the page.
Behind a bust on a plinth a man is sitting cross-legged and smoking a cigarette.
A woman in a pink hooded top with pink shoes is round the corner. She waves at a man on a bike.
A man in a mackintosh with a leather bag and plimsoles walks past. He lurches from side to side, his pace is slow as he heads towards the pedestrian crossing. He stops. He presses the button and waits.
More people arrive at the crossing. He walks out onto a traffic island and crosses again.

A woman comes up to me and asks for the citizens advice bureau. I point her in the right direction.
An older couple walk past. They have hats on. His is a trilby with a feather and hers is a bright blue woollen beret.
A young boy with a cap and a copy of *Loot* in his jean pocket walks past with his head down and a scowl on his face that looks like it is on purpose.
Outside the library someone keeps shouting and everyone looks.

I look for a space that is more separate from the movements of daily life, a place where people go to remove themselves. I walk around my local park and notice all of the benches and the different kinds of position and perspective they offer. I think about the bench as a viewing space, an inscribed position where one can rest, look and think.

24.4.2007
BROCKWELL PARK

I have just walked over to sit on a bench.
It is quiet and warm and there is a breeze.
Things have changed since I was here last. The leaves have come out on the tree in front of me.
Sounds are slightly muffled.
A plane is flying overhead.
The grass in front of me is green and there are small groups of people sitting on it.
A man is crossing in the middle distance. He is dressed in blue. He is taking two small white dogs for a walk. His shoulders are hunched.
A couple walking up the hill have passed quietly behind me, avoiding the space in front.

'Only when opportunities for sitting exist can there be stays of any duration... the existence of good opportunities for sitting paves the way from the numerous activities that are the prime attractions in public spaces: eating, reading, sleeping, knitting, playing chess, sunbathing, watching people, and so on.¹⁴

2.5.2007
BROCKWELL PARK

Here she comes with bright red hair and a dog ball. She is wearing lime green and singing: *Noah, Noah, who built the Ark*. She has a sideways walk and colourful sandals.

There is a woman and a young boy who is on a lead and turning circles.

There is a man with a wheeled shopping bag and a baby on his back.

The boy on the lead comes towards me, staggering with arms outstretched.

A man with a plastic bag comes closer. I am not sure whether to look up. He walks past at a distance.

I look as people pass by, watching the last movement, the last gesture: the flick of a leg, a tilt, a sound, an arm. Some gesture is left behind.

It is windy. Everything is moving around and I am trying to keep still.

A man is passing in a black top. He is clapping. Hands behind and then in front. He has a cap on. He is in the middle distance. The clapping is drawing my attention. I notice him approaching the middle, reaching the spot between two tower blocks on the horizon.

I like it when he gets there, just for a moment. Clapping in the space between the buildings on the horizon. I can hear him move away but the clapping stays audible for a while.

Two girls have just passed by in blue and pink. They are chatting and do not really see me. They are exercising, in tracksuits with bottles of water and a faster kind of pace than looks natural.

Their hips are swinging. They are swinging. Here comes the man that was sitting here before me. He was sitting in the middle and very still with one arm stretched back and curved around. Quite a position. He has a very slow and steady pace — a rolling amble. He has big swinging arms and stripes and says hello to me. He walks off calmly.

'...the sense of the world's concreteness, irreducible, immediate, tangible, of something clear and closer to us: of the world, no longer as a journey having constantly to be remade, not as a race without end, a challenge having constantly to be met, not as the one pretext for a despairing acquisitiveness, not as the illusion of a conquest, but as the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a geography of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.'⁵

The path is quiet for a moment so I look up and around.

A man with a white dog and a mobile is coming.

A woman in a black skirt takes me by surprise.

I look down and let her pass.

The man with the mobile fills the gap between the buildings, playing with a football.

I look into the distance. There are more people.

A boy with satsumas is laughing to himself, a loud laugh.

A pair come round for the second time. She says I am sitting here so peaceful.

A boy in a red sun hat stares at me, moving his head as he goes past. A long way round.

A girl in a blue top comes back again, she is looking at her phone, absorbed by it.

The mother and the baby are back. They move in many directions. He is investigating a bush, picking up a stick, looking down at the ground, looking up. He doesn't quite say bye, bye, but he does smile and wave as he goes, with tentative steps. He looks back one last time before he is waylaid by another bush.

They have gone back to where they started.

I read George Perec's *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*⁶ and see it as an exercise in drawing out the space of looking. I think about the pace of observation and the selection of time and place. His writing is full of visual references and signs, it is as if he has chosen to write in the place of a photograph, or to look for what is left behind. He asks:

'What happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds...

"Outline of an inventory of some strictly visible things:

— Letters of the alphabet, words, "KLM" (on the breast pocket of someone walking by), an uppercase "P" which stands for "Parking"...
— Conventional symbols: arrows, under the "P" of the parking lot signs, one of them pointing slightly toward the ground, the other in the direction of rue Bonaparte (Luxembourg side), at least four one-way signs (a fifth one reflected in one of the café mirrors)."⁷

⁵ George Perec, *Species of Space and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999) p.79.

⁶ George Perec, *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*, trans. Marc Lowenthal (Cambridge MA: Wakefield Press, 2010).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5.

23.5.2007
BROCKWELL PARK

It is hot and the park is full of people lying on the grass.

A woman passes walking hard with her head down and her arms swinging. She looks tired and red in the face.

Next comes a couple and I hear a rustling bag before I see them and the sound of flipflops.

They are holding hands and wearing sunglasses. A man and a boy in the distance are chattering away and laughing: *'Silly, silly, silly, silly...'* strange sounds and giggles. *'Silly Freddie, silly Freddie, I'm going to drop you down my back.'*

A tall, thin man jaunts past with a bag on his shoulder. He looks at me and smiles.

There is a light breeze and sounds of traffic.

Here comes a man with a dog, the dog is old with a grey muzzle. The man stops. Two men with moustaches come by. They are talking about living-room furniture.

It is very hot now.

The next bench along is in the shade but someone is sitting on it. I can just see his silhouette.

People keep passing: a mother and daughter, they look alike.

The sun goes in. It is a relief.

Here comes a group of men wearing football clothes. There is a little boy with them holding a plastic bag and a toy gun.

The man on the next bench is having a cigarette. He has his legs crossed.

A couple of men swagger past with deep voices. One of them has a walk where he lifts his heels of the ground and seems to hold them there for a split second.

Another cloud is here.

The crows look tired.

Here comes a woman with a dog lead round her waist. Her dog has had a haircut and is sniffing round my feet.

'Hello its me', says a mother in a red dress, *'last night wasn't so bad'*. She's got red shoes on too, she slept in her bed last night, not in the blow up one.

A couple of boys on a fallen tree are pretending to shoot each other with sticks.

Here comes a man with a grey beard in an electric buggy. He has a cap on and a dog on his lap and he is going down hill very fast.

I turn around and look and he is already at the bottom.

Another man with a stick bends down and pats a dog. He has a deep tan.

A huge baby comes by. Big blue eyes. He stares at me.

23.5.2007
BROCKWELL PARK

A man in a black leather cap passes by. He has something in his hands that he is looking at intently. He walks off inspecting it with loose and comfortable steps.

Here comes a man with a large stomach and a denim jacket. He has glasses and a woolly hat on. He smiles at me.

There is another man with long dreadlocked hair and a plastic bag. He is looking in the bin for something he must have thrown away. He finds it and walks off with his hair swinging down his back.

Two men walk past in the distance. One has yellow stripes on his arm and the other a bright orange bag. That is all I can see.

Here comes a mother with a baby who is talking. They look at my dog.

A woman with a black dog walks by.

The dog chases a crow.

'Good places to sit and rest are very definately a question of good benches — and inviting ones. Not any bench will do.'⁸

17.7.2007

BROCKWELL PARK

Three girls are blowing whistles in the distance.
Dogs are barking and there is a siren.
A man with a big beard is throwing balls for two
small white dogs.
The whistles keep blowing intermittently.
It feels like it might rain.
The trees are moving.
Two young boys are sitting across the way with
their bikes on the ground and laughing hard.
A man in a cap wearing beige is coming past
with a white plastic bag. He has got a ponytail
and is looking off to the side.
He looks at me.

I am interested in Sartre's description of *The Look* as containing a primary relation between beings. In *Being and Nothingness* he undertakes a detailed phenomenology of human relations, a description of the spacial and physical unfolding of things. It is both unsettling and uncertain, it de-centres and changes our relation with the world. When Sartre describes *The Look* it is alongside other noises and sensations: 'The Look will be given just as well on occasion where there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by a silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain.'⁹ I write in the place of the photograph, describing the feeling of relations and space. I move towards the camera to enact the opening of a shutter.

'Practical exercises

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps.
Apply yourself. Take your time... Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on... You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless... Force yourself to see more flatly. Detect a rhythm.'¹⁰

PHOTOGRAPHS OF FIGURES

Whilst sitting and writing I notice the gestures of people as they pass by, I want to look at these gestures through the camera. I take photographs of people as they leave the frame, to show the separation that the photograph incurs. I press the shutter just as the person disappears hoping to have held onto the last moment.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.257.

¹⁰ George Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999) p.50.



'I am in a public park. Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man; I apprehend him as an object and the same time as a man. What does this signify? What do I mean when I assert that his object is a man?'¹¹



11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.278.



'It is not I who realize this disintegration; it appears to me as a relation which I aim at emptily across the distances which I originally established between things. It stands as a background of things, a background which on principle escapes me and which is conferred on them from without. Thus the appearance, among the objects of my universe is what I mean by the appearance of a man in my universe.'¹²



12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.278.



'But the *Other* is still an object *for me*. He belongs to *my distances*; the man is there, twenty paces from me, he is turning his back on *me*. As such he is again two yards, twenty inches from the lawn, six yards from the statue; hence the disintegration of my universe is contained within the limits of this same universe; we are not dealing here with a flight of the world towards nothingness or outside itself.'¹³



VIEWS FROM PARK BENCHES

Writing has extended the space of photographs. I have spent time looking at what I would not have had time to notice while looking through the viewfinder of my camera. Through looking and writing I have encountered others.

In response to this I decide to take photographs from all the benches in the park. I want to photograph in the places that I have been writing. It is a kind of spatial experiment. I want to construct a simultaneity of perspectives and collate all of the viewpoints. Through this excess of information I construct a relation between each individual position and enable a more general view.

I move through the park resting briefly and taking up my position within the inscribed perspective of the benches. I aim across the distance with my camera trying to capture the emptiness. Space escapes and only reconfigures itself when I put the camera down.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.279.

I come across an old 1960s paddling pool, it is circular and blue, a smooth round space that forms a concave shape as it drops down from the level. The paddling pool is surrounded by a thick hedge creating a private blue circular space, empty in the Autumn cold. Sheltered by the hedges are a series of benches positioned symmetrically around the empty pool. I move from bench to bench, looking at slightly different angles back across the pool to an empty bench and another aspect of the hedge. The pool has a drain in the middle that becomes a pivot for my movement. As I move around, space closes in on itself and I consider the relation between myself, my camera and this empty pool. I photograph the view and I photograph the bench, the space I have vacated and made empty. Then I move on.





As I leave the paddling pool looking for the next bench, I come across a large construction that is formed of six benches placed together in the shape of a hexagon. It sits just outside the concave enclosure of the paddling pool and seems to offer a completely inverted viewing experience. I move around it, looking out into the rest of the park, experiencing a kind of vacant panopticon.

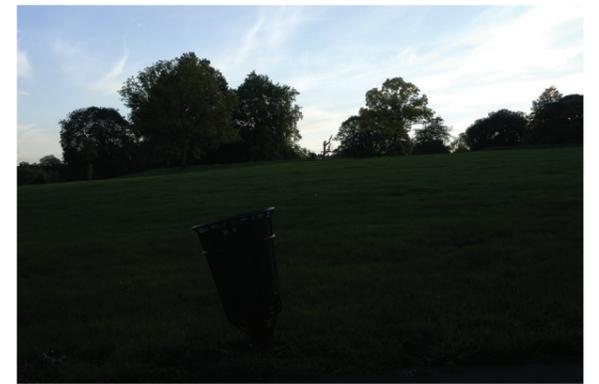




I carry on, photographing each bench and its corresponding view. I put them together to create an amalgam, a photographic construction that can fold in on itself and look in two directions at once. Like constructing a game of consequences backwards: my absent body and that of another reformed through the relation between the two spaces. I think about the space of *The Look*.

'To be sure, the lawn remains two yards and twenty inches away from him, but it is also as a lawn bound to him in a relation that at once both transcends distance and contains it. Instead of the two terms of the distance being indifferent, interchangeable, as in a reciprocal relation, the distance is unfolding from the man whom I see and extending up to the lawn as the synthetic up-surge of a univocal relation. We are dealing with a relation which is without parts, given at one stroke, inside of which there unfolds a spatiality which is not my spatiality; for instead of a grouping towards me of the objects, there is now an orientation which flees from me.'¹⁴

14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.278.





THE LOOK, A CONVERSATION WITH JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

As I continue on, I consider the bench as a space that represents the act of looking, silently. It awaits occupation. I wait for the benches to become empty before I can assume my position, a position previously filled by someone else, whose previous occupancy lingers. We look out together and I think about Jean-Paul Sartre. I try to describe these encounters and in doing so I start a conversation, at some points I engage in a kind of reverie and at others I interject.



I am sitting on a park bench. I have sat here many times before. I am looking, waiting for someone to pass me by. I am still. The stillness of the scene makes me think about an image. My observation and the sequence of events combine towards constructing one. Suddenly Jean-Paul Sartre is outside the park, on the other side of the railings. He is watching. He is looking at a man across from me. The park is quite empty. It is cold and I struggle to sit still. I am not sure if he is going to enter or stay on the outside. The moment seems to be slowing down and we are suddenly caught by the action of a small child. She is playing, kicking her legs into the air and laughing. She appears to be still. The gesture of kicking and shouting holds her; leg in the air and mouth wide open, the strange angles of a body observed in motion. All of a sudden it has passed. Another sound and another gesture takes its place. The man opposite has got up and walked away.

‘Walking by the railing of the municipal park, I caught sight of the man in the cape. He was still there in the deserted park; his nose had become as red as his ears.

I was going to push open the gate, but the expression on his face stopped me: he was wrinkling up his eyes and half grinning, in a stupid, simpering way. But at the same time he was staring straight ahead at something I couldn't see, with a look so concentrated and intense I suddenly swung round.

Opposite him with one foot in the air and her mouth half-open, a little girl of about ten was watching him in fascination, tugging nervously at her scarf and thrusting her pointed face forward. The fellow was smiling to himself, like somebody who is about to play a good joke. All of a sudden he stood up, with his hands in the pockets of his cape, which reached down as far as his feet. He took a couple of steps forward and his eyes started rolling. I thought he was going to fall. But he went on smiling, with a sleepy air.¹⁵

The shadow of Sartre's look is passing too.

*Black? I felt the word subside, empty itself of meaning with an extraordinary speed. Black? The root was not black, it was not the black there was on that piece of wood — it was... something else: black, like the circle, did not exist. I looked at the root: was it more than black or almost black...?

That black there against my foot, didn't look like black, but rather the confused effort to imagine black by someone who had never seen black and wouldn't have known how to stop, who would have imagined an ambiguous creature beyond the colours. It resembled a colour but also... a bruise or again a secretion, a yolk — and something else, a smell for example, it melted into a smell of wet earth, of warm moist wood, into a black smell spread like varnish over that sinewy wood, into a taste of sweet, pulped fibre. I don't SEE that black in a simple way: sight is an abstract invention, a cleaned-up simplified idea, a human idea. That black, a weak, amorphous presence, far surpasses sight, smell, taste. But that richness became confusion and finally ceased to be anything at all because it was too much.¹⁶

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldwick (Penguin Books: London, 1965) p.117.

16 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldwick (Penguin Books: London, 1965) p.186.



I look away. I look at the ground. I am looking at a patch of grass in front of me. There is a firm but gentle breeze. I can hear it. It comes from behind and in the trees; a crisp rustling sound caused by the brittle leaves that are thinning at the end of the summer. Around my face the sound becomes louder and rounder as it moves through my hair and the space in my ears. The ground slopes upwards and I look down, at a patch of grass just in front. It is hard to separate things, but I try, focusing on just one small area, defining it and deciding on the limits of my attention; where one blade of grass starts and another ends. There is a twisted mass in the middle, of yellow straw matter. It curves around and in on itself. There are small shadows within which I can see areas that are darker and lighter forming an intricate weave of shape. Out of the circular form emerge small green stems, they point in different directions and are all kinds of lengths. There are too many to distinguish, but too few to become indistinguishable. One long blade bows towards me and moves with the breeze forwards and to the right, buckling down and back on itself, flickering lightly with a tapered end. The very tip of the blade catches the light, pointed and fine. A shadow crosses it and a line folds the shape upwards and downwards following the curve in a bright, deep, grass green. The light follows back and in towards the darkness and the tangle of a confused space. It crosses two other blades of grass, one that is cut abruptly across its thickest part revealing a stump.

'The grass is something qualified, it is this green grass which exists for the other, in this sense the very quality of the object, its deep, raw green is in direct relation to this man. This green turns toward the other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the other as an objective relation. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place.'¹⁷

17 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.255.



When my attention is saturated I look up, across and around. I move my body as if awakening and get up to leave. I don't look back. I move on, passing things by. As I walk I converse with remembered fragments from *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*.

S*... I got up, I went out. When I got to the gate, I turned around. Then the park smiled at me. I leaned against the gate and I looked at the park for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the clump of laurel bushes, meant something ... I regretfully felt that I had not the means of understanding. No means. Yet it was there, expectant, it resembled a gaze ...¹⁸

Now I am thinking about looking. I am remembering the configuration of space between the bench and the view: my feet on the pavement, the grey strip of the path fading across pebble and mud into thick ground and grass. People pass me by, moving over slightly in a curve as they go. Between us, at that moment, an image occurs.¹⁹

S* The Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This *not* indicates a nothingness as a *given* element of separation between the Other and myself. Between the Other and myself *there* is a nothingness of separation. This nothingness does not derive its origin from myself nor from the Other, nor is it a reciprocal relation between the Other and myself. On the contrary, as a primary absence of relation, it is originally the foundation of all relation between the Other and me.²⁰

I think about the image as a space between myself and what is passing by — an encounter that is continually leaving the frame, or never entering the frame. An image happens ...

S* It appears that the world has a kind of drainhole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing through that hole.²¹

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldwick (London: Penguin Books, 1965) p.193.

19 When I say image I mean a relation between image and word, something like an encounter.

20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Oxford: Routledge, 2000) p.254.

21 *Ibid.*, p.256.

An image as an encounter with the world (or with an image). I am looking for an image that empties itself out. An image with a drain hole in the middle. An exhausted image. As I think about what an exhausted image can be, I think of the paddling pool and its great weathered expanse of blue. It is not there any more. I think about the image as an expression of exhaustion, that exhaustion is the appropriate expression for an image.²² I think about what happens when I write in the place of a photograph, what happens to the image? It seems that writing from these benches has opened up the space of the image to time and to encounter, to encounters with others and with Sartre. I have responded to this by going back and photographing these spaces, putting a photographic image in relation to the ground that was opened up through writing. The relation between this writing and these photographs seems to empty out the space of the image, to exhaust it.



²² The idea of exhaustion in relation to the image is found in Thomas Carl Wall's book: *Radical Passivity, Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (State University of New York Press, 1999) and is also found in Jean-Luc Nancy and Gilles Deleuze. It reflects a personal sense of the image as something that is exhausted or that I seek to exhaust.



CHARLES' HAT

AN EXAMPLE OF DESCRIPTION
FIGURES BECOME MORE CENTRAL
DESCRIPTIONS OF FIGURES
A CONVERSATION OCCURS



AN EXAMPLE OF DESCRIPTION

I spend time looking for moments of exhaustive description, moments where the image is replaced or run dry. Instead of writing beside the image I experiment with writing over it. I look for literary descriptions, images in words, examples. In Gustave Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary* I read the description of Charles Bovary.

'The newcomer, who was hanging in the corner so that the door half hid him from view, was a country lad of about fifteen, taller than any of us. He had his hair cut into bangs like a cantor in a village church, and he had a gentle, timid look. He wasn't broad in the shoulders, but his green jacket with its black buttons seemed tight under the arms; and through the vents of his cuffs we could see red wrists that were clearly unaccustomed to being covered. His yellowish breeches were hiked up by his suspenders, and from them emerged a pair of blue-stockinged legs. He wore heavy shoes, hobnailed and badly shined...'

I want to exhaust the possibilities of a photograph through writing, to see what remains:

'To exhaust words, they must be related to others who pronounce them — or rather, who emit them, secrete them — following flows that sometimes intermingle and sometimes separate off.

This second, very complex, moment is not unrelated to the first: it is always an Other who speaks, since the words have not waited for me.¹

Later, I come across Roland Barthes reading and writing about description in Flaubert's novel, *Bouvard and Pecuchet*:

'I read this sentence, which gives me pleasure, "Clothes, sheets, napkins were hanging vertically, attached by wooden clothespins to taut lines." Here I enjoy an excess of precision, a kind of maniacal exactitude of language, a descriptive madness.'²

EXAMPLE

¹ Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Micheal A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.156.

² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995) p.26.

*His cap was still in his lap when we'd finished reciting our prayer. It was headgear of composite order, containing elements of an ordinary hat, a hussar's busby, a lancer's cap, a sealskin cap and a nightcap: one of those wretched things whose mute hideousness suggests unplumbed depths, like an idiot's face. Ovoid and stiffened with whalebone, it began with three convex strips; then followed alternating lozenges of velvet and rabbit's fur, separated by a red band; then came a kind of bag, terminating in a cardboard-lined polygon intricately decorated with braid. From this hung, excessively thin cord ending in a kind of tassel of gold netting. The cap was new, its peak was shiny.*³

I sit and look and read and write, exhaustive moments — 'The seated person is the witness around which the other revolves while developing all the degrees of tiredness... But why is the seated person on the look out for words, for voices, for sounds?'⁴

HAT

I encounter this description and describe it in turn, trying to conjure an image of Charles Bovary and of his hat. A sense of him is overwhelmed by details that jostle for attention one at a time. I am reminded of trying to describe a detail in a photograph and consider what is being made present, what is figured. I am looking at Charles' hat. The hat becomes a thing and I describe it. I describe it in order to think: What is IT? Is it in an image? Is it an example? It is an example of a description of a hat. It is also an example of writing: of description. Through description it becomes an image that replaces and obscures Charles Bovary as he stutters to speak his name. I am drawn to this writing because of the way it presents a simultaneously vivid and obscure vision. In constructing and obliterating the conjured image, Flaubert appeals to the desire through writing to become an eye, to 'faire voir' and so to approach looking in writing and writing as looking. In doing so he is making an image. However, he is not attempting to bring together image and text, he constructs each alongside the other, looking at each other from across a distance as if in conversation.

'A silence so huge has grabbed you by the throat and roared in your ears, but in that silence language touched you with what it can do: language can give communicability, which is what puts us in contact with mute things and constitutes the event of language.'⁵

The section I have chosen forms the opening to the novel. The style of this description shows Flaubert's desire to produce a satire of the plastic mode of writing exposing the belief that you can reach the truth of an object through obsessive description. Exact description is used as part of a critique of middle class French life. Flaubert was not a Realist. 'The whole process of exhaustive description is mocked in this description which would seem to aspire to the evocation of a clear image but which fails to do so.'⁶

IT

³ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmiller (London: Everyman's Library, 1993) p.4.

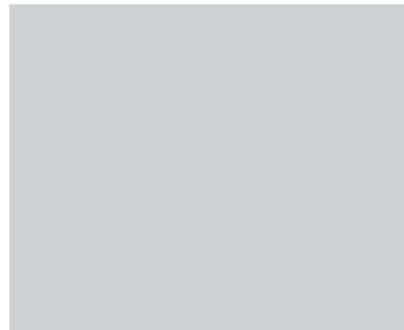
⁴ Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Micheal A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.156.

⁵ Yve Lomax, *Passionate Being* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2010) p.9.

⁶ Adrienne Tooke, *Flaubert and the Pictorial Arts* (Oxford University Press, 2000) p.74.

This separation between word and image could be seen to be close to Roland Barthes' idea of the pictorial in writing, the painterly writing of desire, however, description is not painterly, it is indexical. I am thinking of it in terms of a photograph and the way in which a photograph constitutes the relations between things, simultaneously exposing and obscuring them. Charles' hat is a parody of an impossible object, it suggests and constructs an image of a hat and obliterates it simultaneously. It presents the disjuncture between the written and the visual. Description is used in order to heighten this disjuncture.

The description is Charles Bovary. He appears cut off and half concealed. He is hidden and revealed through the detailed description of his hat. He is young; he is adolescent, with a certain hairstyle and a timid look. He is not broad but his clothes are tightly fitting, he is awkward and has outgrown them, or is not accustomed to wearing them. He is out of place. From his wrists down the body to his breeches, again awkwardly hiked, yellow and moving down further, emerge the legs and heavy shoes. The body protrudes uncomfortably from these garments, and appears in relief to be given little emphasis except in negative: the unaccustomed wrists and the blue-stockinged legs. Apart from a sense of misplacement, Charles Bovary remains obscure.



I am thinking of Barthes definition of concrete detail: "Concrete detail" is constituted by the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signifier is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a form of the signified, i.e. the narrative structure itself. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the 'real' returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to denote the real directly, all that they do, without saying it, is signify it; Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: we are real; it is the category of 'the real'... which is then signified.⁷

IT.

Then: the hat, which again remains separate from other hats in custom and in form. The hat is in itself other. The hat is referred to in such a range of forms that the image of it is constantly transfigured and again, left confused and obscure. Doubly obscured by the passing of time and fashion. It is composite, multiple. It is an ordinary hat. It is a hussar's busby. It suggests unplumbed depths. It is transfigured through the structuring device of whalebone into a face; it is ovoid. Ovoid is awkward and strange. The word allows a voluminous shape to appear for a moment before it again is loaded with strange references and materials that jar. It suggests roundness and emptiness, fullness and lack: ovoid is the boy, ovoid is the hat. It is unlike any hat. It does not hold together as an image of a hat. It is not a hat. This description is most obtuse.

OVOID

Michel Foucault's book *This is not a Pipe* comes to mind, in particular the scene also in an imagined classroom where Foucault enacts the absence / presence of Magritte's pipe. '...The voice is confused and choked. The baffled master lowers his extended pointer, turns his back to the board, regards the uproarious students, and does not realize that they laugh so loudly because above the blackboards and his stammered denials, a vapor has just risen, little by little taking shape and now creating, precisely and without doubt, a pipe... So, on its bevelled and clearly rickety mounts, the easel has but to tilt, the frame to loosen, the painting to tumble down, the words to be scatters. The "pipe" can "break": The common place — banal work or art or everyday lesson — has disappeared.⁸

⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) p.148.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (University of California Press, 1982) p.31.

Convex strips, it begins with convex strips. They protrude outwards, giving shape, ovoid and convex, bulbous in its tripartite form. This shape is beginning to take place but is agitated by the addition of alternating lozenges, and not of a consistent material but of velvet and rabbit fur, deeply tactile and strangely placed on the hat of a boy. It begins to sound like a clown's hat, a ridiculous hat. The strangeness of the hat replaces the boy completely in the process of trying to amalgamate the range of textures and shapes being presented. The hat replaces the boy through its component parts, the lozenges that are intersected by alternating bands of velvet and fur, which are in themselves separated by a red band. This is not the sum of the hat, the hat continues but becomes more vague, the precision of the materials merge into a 'kind of bag' and then terminate, at last in a cardboard lined polygon, intricately decorated with braid. The final element is the long cord with a tassel. This demands a sigh in reaching the completion of the description before trying to come to terms with the details that have been disclosed. It is curtly completed with a much sharper final statement that leaves the reader on more solid ground: 'The cap was new, its peak was shiny'. Completion of fact, but again with another point of form being added at the final moment: it has a peak.

The facts as they stand then are that the hat is ovoid, it has convex lozenges that are intersected with textures of fur and velvet and separated by red bands, above this form is a bag like shape with a cardboard polygon and a tassel, it has a peak. The hat is Charles Bovary, in metonymic form. It is given in fullness whilst the boy stands half hidden behind a door frame. The hat is dropped; it is found and it rests on his lap as he stutters to speak his name — the hat remains. His name is indecipherable but his hat remains.

How and why does this unbelievable hat dominate, obliterate the name of the boy as he stumbles to introduce himself and attempts to place his hat among the other hats? What does this hat do? What does the description of the hat do? Does it, in its obsessive detail annihilate the possibility of description? Why does this description of this hat interest me? It is not because of its symbolic function as a critique of the French bourgeoisie. It is not even as an initiation in entering a debate about the status and role of the novel, of realism versus the imaginary. Description exists in this passage with an obstinate power. It almost seems to annihilate itself; it defiantly stands in place of the figure of Charles, a large and looming hat vision that is beyond the realm of metaphor. I have come across it looking for a moment in literature that might speak to me about the problems of describing the image. This passage comes before narrative. It comes before the establishment of character or plot. It is placed at the mouth of the novel as something to be passed through. It is simultaneously beyond the character, beyond the object and also beyond the description. It points to a place beyond the possibility of what can be written. It suggests a collapse of form.

Again I think about what can be said in *Passionate Being*.⁹ Charles' Hat and Flaubert's description of it seem to relate directly to this sense of utterance and pure conveyance.

A showing of language happening at the end of word and image, or in the space that their incompatibility opens up.

⁹ Yve Lomax, *Passionate Being* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2010).

Structurally in terms of the novel this hat acts as a façade through which the reader enters, a façade beyond which character, plot and narrative emerge. It is therefore a threshold and not an entirely welcoming one. It is as obstructive as it is emergent. It is also ovoid, and so façade becomes face, suggesting the face of the boy, the character that is and is not revealed through the unfolding texture of the hat. It is façade and face. It is also eye. It looks back at us as we try to imagine it, the undulations and complexities of fabric. It is façade, face and eye. As I read I also speak.¹⁰ I speak the words in an attempt to bring the image forward, my lips move and my mouth articulates the words as my eyes strain to see the phantom hat. Just as Charles shortly will stutter and fail to pronounce his name: '*charbovari, charbovari*', the hat remains a stuttering of form. In reading I move between façade, face, eye and mouth. I constantly shift between these bodily forms seeking the image of the hat.

As Charles Bovary stutters, so do I. I stutter in speaking about the relation between these words and these photographs, we stutter as if stuttering were a contagion, a form of breaking and opening up words and images to language.

This stuttering man evokes a description given by Yve Lomax¹¹ about a figure of a man in a doorway. This man stutters and then utters and then gasps and puts his hand to his mouth.

'Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree.'¹²

STUTTER

FIGURES BECOME MORE CENTRAL

During the process of reading and looking I make series of photographs of passers by. They are a response to the thought: How can I make an image, or how can a photographic image take place? I choose elements from within the furniture of the street to compose sequences around: a lamppost, a circle, a shadow, a manhole. The interaction between a passer by and these elements and my camera determine the photograph and also expose it. I think about Charles Bovary's Hat and how it exists in place of Charles Bovary himself, how the description of the hat obscures the image and replaces the man. I attempt to exhaust the image through my photographs, through a strategic combinatorial approach. I make them in order to describe them. I then intend to speak them and after speaking them find another voice to speak them. Finally they will be heard by others and spoken by the voice of another and hopefully show a thinking about the photographic image and what it stands for, what it is an example of.

'The combinatorial is the art or science of exhausting the possible through inclusive disjunctions. But only an exhausted person can exhaust the possible, because he has renounced all need, preference, goal, or signification. Only the exhausted person is sufficiently disinterested, sufficiently scrupulous.'¹³

'The aporia will be solved if one considers that the limit of the series does not lie at the infinity of the terms but can be anywhere in the flow: between two terms, between two voices or the variations of a single voice.'¹⁴

¹⁰ I am aware of Flaubert speaking his words, or shouting them, submitting them to the 'gueuloir', the yelling, speaking voice that would test the structure of his language.

¹¹ Yve Lomax, *Figure – Gesture – Pure Means*, at the Colloquium, *A Breath for Nothing: Approaching the Limit*. Central Saint Martins, June 26, 2012.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Micheal A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.111.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Micheal A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.157.









DESCRIPTIONS OF FIGURES

I make a series of photographs in order to describe them. I make twelve, the length of a medium format film. Before I start to write, I spend time looking and drawing, marking details and spaces within the photographs, slowing down my pace of viewing. This is a form of note making, touching the image before I can write, allowing a silent space to exist before I attempt to cover it over with words. I describe them extensively, writing around the surface of the image, drawing out details and relations, considering what areas to touch on and how they relate to each other. I then edit and condense the description into to a long paragraph describing the relation between the figure and the space of the image. I replace the photograph with words, leaving the photograph to be seen afterwards as a memory of the description.

(man walking away)

A man is walking away. He has his back turned and is heading towards the entrance of Iceland. Another man is crossing in the foreground and a lady in a white sun hat is walking out of the frame to the right. A woman is walking towards the man who is walking away. The man is centrally located with a large bollard to the left and a traffic cone to the right. His ears protrude slightly on each side of his head and his hair is thick and dark. There is lightness on the top and patches above the neck that suggest grey. The collar of a mid-grey shirt curves down and touches the sloping and equally proportioned downwards curve of his shoulders. This momentum continues through to the arms. The left arm hangs down by the side just separate from the top of the left thigh. The sleeve is rolled up to the elbow. The right arm is tucked under holding a black jacket, which is bulky and falls down. There is a crease under the right arm that starts at a convergent point between the upper arm and the torso. The crease folds outwards, fanning slightly with a lightening tone and gives way to a muffled surface of fabric that follows the shape of the arm. From the darkest point inside and underneath the armpit a crease of fabric falls above the folded and tucked coat. The shape of the back is defined by a shirt that sticks to it in places due to large patches of sweat, particularly down the centre. This distorts the fall of the fabric causing it to sway sideways in deep swathes towards the base of the back; creases fold away from damp patches billowing out slightly before being tucked into the jeans. The jeans are black; they absorb the light; only the stitching can be seen on the back trouser pocket. The left leg is slightly bent and the foot is raised backwards with a leather shoe hovering in the air above a small misshapen shadow.



(man in a cap)

A man is passing by a lamppost. The right foot striding forwards with toes reaching outwards and upwards from within his sandals. He is stepping into a shadow that falls on the ground in front, making a mid-grey outline on the pavement, illuminating patches of chewing gum. The big toe is the most projected part of the body. A rigid bone in the foot leads back to the bottom of the jeans, which billow forward, folding dark creases around the ankle and calf, sweeping upwards to horizontal folds at the back of the knee. The seam of the jean rises upwards and the hand falls onto it. The fingers fold and curve lightly inwards falling in line with each other to the edge of the little finger. The bone of the wrist catches the light and protrudes, as does a slight crease in the wrinkled skin of the elbow. The shape of the arm recedes into a bright, white t-shirt that folds curving down to define the shape of the shoulder. The black strap of a satchel cuts across the white expanse, leaving a shadow that waves, deflected down the curves of the t-shirt to rest on the left side hip, with a large lip folding over to close. The left leg extends backwards in a straight line. The brightly lit creases of the jean reach down to the heel, which is lifting off the ground, only slightly. The seam of the jean curves around the inner thigh towards the front of the knee where it intersects with the forward motion of the right leg. The neck rises out of the curved collar, upwards. The muscle, slightly flexed, leans forward to the back of the head, the structure of which is clearly visible due to the short crop or shave of the hair. A cap is clasped at the back with a clip binding around to a large and convexly bent peak at the front. The peak projects outwards from the face almost in line with the tip of the toe. His eyes are looking forwards, the silhouette of eyelashes just visible in the shade of the cap. The cheekbones are high and half lit as is the nose, beneath which a squarely structured jaw and chin sit in the shade. The left arm is tucked back, elbow bent and emergent in the sunlight.



(man with plastic bag)

A man is passing to the left. His right heel lightly touches the ground, the toe just lifted, leaving a dark and defined shadow, separating the space between the shoe and the pavement. It is about to cross a dark stain that intersects the space in front of the man between a bollard and the pavement edge. He is wearing black leather shoes that are tied in a bow; they are shiny with a small crease across the top. The left leg is slightly bent, hanging down from the knee, the line of the trouser seam joining a light even toned denim, broken once by a long and deep fold of fabric curving across the upper thigh. There appears to be a rectangular shaped object in the left trouser pocket. A dark belt ties the trousers round the waist over which spills a tucked-in light coloured short-sleeved shirt. Grey creases follow the body around the curve of the stomach up to another rectangular shaped object that sits in the front pocket on the left hand side. This object causes a strain in the fabric of the shirt dragging it down from the shoulder. Out of the collar rises the neck, short and forward leaning, shaded by the rest of the head. The jaw appears clenched, mouth shut with thin lips held together. The left eye looks ahead intently, the eyebrow arches upwards and then joins the soft and dappled skin in a double layer of shadow beneath. The top of the head is illuminated due to an absence of hair. The forearm drops down the left side of the body encircled by a black digital watch that fits tightly about the wrist. Veins can be seen protruding from the top of the left hand down to the knuckles. Fingers curve backwards and inwards, the tips just visible. From the fingers hangs a half filled plastic bag. There is large black text on the otherwise blank bag that is all obscured except a re-iterated letter 'e'. His right hand swings forwards, half open, all fingers loosely curved. The thumb falls downwards encircled by the space of the hand in mid air.



(couple passing to the left)

A couple are passing to the left. She is on the near side with her head turned away and her face obscured by a cropped, white, wavy body of hair. Her chin briefly emerges from beneath the hair and is collared by a floral short-sleeved shirt that is gathered at the waist. Her left arm emerges from the short sleeve and bends forward with a round indentation at the elbow. A defined line moves from elbow to wrist and ends underneath the plaited metal band of a wristwatch. The rest of the hand extends forwards from here in a clenched fist, giving it the appearance of a stump. It is marked with light falling on the band of a wedding ring. The hand breaks the line of the body and reaches the right leg. The leg is clad in a dark black trouser that extends forwards and downwards to the foot, which is raised off the ground from the heel in a large leather sandal. Between her body and his, their hands seem to be interlinked. He has his left foot extended slightly in front of hers. It is flat on the ground but does not yet appear to be carrying much weight. He is wearing a light coloured deck-shoe; it has a rope that rises up the front of the foot with a tassel tied in the middle. From inside this light leather slip-on shoe, he is wearing a black sock that is pulled up and sits firmly on the calf, stopping just as the shape of the calf muscle extends to a tensed knee that is propelling the body forwards. He is wearing shorts, which are creased slightly around the opening of a pocket on the left hand side. The creases continue in a lighter toned shirt that follows the contour of a protruding stomach to a loose and floppy open collar. His head rises above the white body of hair. His glasses, half shaded and round, cover the eyes and frame the raised eyebrows that suggest a surprised expression. His mouth is half open as she turns her head towards him.



(woman wearing silver sandals)

She is moving across the space with her left foot bent backwards. Her toe is touching the pavement, encased by a silver sandal wrapped around the top, middle and heel of the foot. The left leg disappears into the movement of a loose skirt that curves around the calf in folds and rises, floating backwards into the middle ground. The skirt has a diagonal shape to its cut and a light grey toned floral pattern. A full and pendulous plastic bag hangs down the middle of the body from the wrist of the left forearm, folding around the shapes of the objects contained within it. The arm and hand are held midway up the body keeping the bag in place. Touching the plastic around the wrist is a large and brightly lit watch; it has a rectangular face and a thick band and is clearly defined in relation to the forearm. The upper arm is covered by a white sleeve that stretches around its shape, the shoulder is padded. A black strap crosses the white shirt and cuts down between the arm and the breast to meet a bag that sits underneath it. There is the possibility of a zip or opening adjacent to the elbow. The collar of the white shirt has two sections and traces the neck and chest down to the top of a vest. The neck has crease lines curving around to the back where a thick body of dark hair is held together by a band that follows around the left side of the face in a sweep. The front of the hair has a tight curve to it. Her face appears in profile from the left hand side, well lit from the top, forehead intersected by a slanted eyebrow. The forward looking eye is framed by metal rimmed spectacles that sit low down the nose cutting the eye in half with the rim. The side of the face is in shadow with light resting on the cheek, the top lip, the bottom lip and the chin. The white shirt is luminous picking out the shape of the right hand side of her body, in curves and protrusions. The right leg is planted firmly on the ground encased in a silver sandal.



(man in a white t-shirt)

A man is passing in front of a lamppost. He is wearing a bright, white t-shirt that illuminates the centre of the image. He is cropped above the knee. His nose is in profile, defined against the black of the lamppost. It is slightly out of focus. It is a good size, not too big; with a gentle slope that tucks itself in towards the end. The left eye looks directly ahead focusing on the middle ground out of the frame in front, it is shaded by a dark eyebrow, with small patches of grey. The eyebrow rises up and then falls back down to meet creases that extend outwards from the side. Just below the eye light falls on the bridge of the nose, forehead, cheek and lower lip. A reflection bounces off the white t-shirt to illuminate the underside of the neck. The earlobe and top of the ear also have light falling on them receding to the dark curves of the inner ear: complex and inverted. The hair is cut short with a regularity that suggests shaving. It is slightly longer on top and considerably grey with a parting to the left side that seems to be a natural movement of hair and not an enforced division. Around the ears and the base of the neck the hair darkens. The collar of the white t-shirt encircles the neck high up and gets brighter across the shoulder to the seam. It is dazzling to look at. The drop of the shoulder allows the fabric to fold and drape around the shape of the arm forming soft shadows. There is a sharp line down the centre of the sleeve that suggests that the t-shirt has been carefully ironed. The forearm swings forward beyond the body. It is covered in a mid-grey shadow with gentle light falling on the topside. It is slightly out of focus, and a large round-faced metal wristwatch is blurred in concurrence. The hand is loosely gathered in on itself with fingers folding inwards. The tendons of the hand move down to join the shading of the fingers. The hand crosses a dark stain on the pavement that moves the eye away from the man and out of the frame to the left, following his line of sight.



(woman with a hooped earring)

A woman is passing to the left. She is looking straight ahead through heavy-rimmed glasses. Her mouth is closed with lips bitten. She has a large hooped gold earring in the left ear. It is oval in shape. Light falls on the top and the underside. Her hair is short and brushed backwards over the top of the head. The shadow of her glasses falls on the side of the face and cheek, the rest of which is obscured by darkness. She is wearing a short-sleeved shirt. It has pointed detailing around the edges that curve from the back of the neck, down the upper body and tuck away underneath the arms. The sleeves are creased and cover the near shoulder down to the beginning of the upper arm. A necklace with a chain holds a large oval shaped pendant in the middle of the chest. Beyond its profile the pavement recedes into the distance. She is wearing a vest that crumples and folds around the shape of the body. The legs of a girl appear from beneath the line of the neck. A large shoulder bag is placed over the near shoulder; its handles sit on top of the shoulder while the bag is held underneath the armpit. It is rectangular in shape with a zipped compartment on the front; it has a sheen to it. The shapes and forms of some of its contents can be seen. The left arm overlaps the bag holding it in place whilst dropping down and forwards across the body. The hand is closed with fingers curved in on themselves and out of sight. On the forearm sit two large plasters made of cotton padding and tape. They are thick and substantial, placed one above the other. They are bright white. The legs are cropped from the shin and clad in a loose floating tie-dyed skirt, the complex patterns of dyes fall around the body sweeping backwards in contrast with the direction of her movement. There is a band of light coloured dye across the middle. From behind the skirt and beneath the bag a traffic cone appears. Directly in front, and slightly behind, another woman walks in the same direction, looking straight ahead.



(man with his back turned)

A man is standing on the pavement, slightly to the left of the centre and in the middle ground. Around him people are walking in different directions. Two ladies enter the frame on the left. On the right stand a pair of pigeons and a woman wearing silver sandals cropped at the edge of the image. In the distance a man stands with his hands on his hips outside the entrance of the supermarket, Iceland. Beyond, people are walking towards the middle ground. The man on the pavement has his back turned and is looking across to the other side of the road. The exact focus of his attention cannot be seen. The direction of his look is suggested by the angle of the head and the slight profile of the face that is visible. The left ear and forehead just appear. The hair is cut short and covers the back of the head. A lamppost rises out from the top of the head and touches the ground between the legs. He is wearing a light coloured long sleeved top. Its creases follow the slight twist of the upper body as it turns forming a contraposto position. There is a small opening at the bottom right side. The right arm is raised from the elbow across the front of the body and out of sight. The left arm hangs downwards and forwards into space, the thumb and middle finger protruding. A mobile phone is held in the centre of the hand. He is wearing mid-toned trousers. Creases span downwards in line with the position of the feet. There is a dark shadow down the top and inner thigh and loose creases that gather around the ankles. The trousers are long, they almost touch the ground, out of the bottom emerge two dark leather shoes placed a shoulder width apart. Between the legs a street bollard and a traffic cone appear. From above the right knee the edge of the pavement crosses followed by a double yellow line. Near to the centre of the image and in line with the right hip is a drain hole.



(man with a white beard)

A man is walking to the left. He is about to pass in front of a street bollard with a circular, convex shaped top. Directly above the bollard, between the man and the edge of the frame, a woman is walking in the same direction. The man is large and close by. His head fills the top-left corner of the image. It is cropped at the crown and covered with long white hair and a white beard. In the middle of the head is a large ear. The ear forms a focal point that counterbalances the central view, into which a man on crutches appears. The beard contours the side of the face. It is clipped and thick. It covers the chin, the top lip and the jaw up to the ear. The left eye looks ahead and forwards out the frame. Creases around the eye suggest either a smile or a grimace. Light falls on the nose, cheek and forehead. The hair is combed backwards and sits in a loose curl at the back of his neck, touching the collar of a waistcoat and a short-sleeved aertex shirt. It is softly illuminated from behind. Two streetlights intersect with the man at the top of the shoulder and again halfway down the back. He wears a utility style waistcoat that has a large pocket on the near side and one at the back with a flap that folds over. The momentum of the man pushes the angle of the body forwards, the left arm swinging out in front to reach the edge of the street bollard. The little finger just appears curling round and back towards the body. Diagonally across from this hand, in the centre of the image, five fingers of an open hand expand outwards, pointing in his direction. The right leg strides forwards, cropped just above the ankle. The left leg extends backwards with the heel of the left foot touching the ground. From here the eye moves between the many different feet that take up positions on the pavement. The centre of the image appears empty.



(woman in a short-sleeved shirt)

A woman is passing to the right. Her body is close by, pressing on the edge of the image. It is out of focus. There is a small area of detail around the seam of a short-sleeved shirt. The sewn edge opens in profile, the stitching follows the movement of the fabric in small and convoluted contours. The rest of the shirt is modulated by hazy tones and creases that fall and stretch in different directions marking the shape of the body. She is cropped from just below the waist and again at the top of the head. Glasses sit low on the nose and the eyes look over the top of them. The ear on the nearside wears a hooped, gold earring. The shoulder seam leads the eye down towards the right arm that is bent forwards at the elbow. The hand holds a white tissue loosely in its fingers. Around the edge of the body the pavement is in clear focus with different tones of grey marked with circular discs of discarded chewing gum. The left hand emerges in front of the chest, the fingers curved around a plastic folder containing some documents. The forefinger and thumb display large and carefully manicured nails. The folder emerges from the point where the neck meets the base of the chin. The head is held upright with lips parted and intersected by the line of a bridge that crosses in the middle distance. The nose protrudes in front of a curved roof that extends outwards over the entrance of the supermarket, Iceland. Behind the body, beyond the loose fabric of the shirt, the tarmac pavement reaches another area composed of cement bricks that lead the eye through edges and intersections towards a large gathering of suitcases being wheeled down the road. From directly out of the contour of the bust a pavement edge and clearly defined double yellow line cross and connect the woman with a man standing on the edge of the pavement to the right. Between them is a traffic cone, clearly focused and illuminated.



(woman in a beige suit)

A woman is walking to the left. She has passed the centre of the image, leaving an empty space behind. On the right a man in a white shirt walks in the other direction. Between him and the edge of the frame there is no one else. In the distance a collection of figures look back towards the passing traffic. She is looking straight ahead, wearing a large, loosely fitted light toned suit. The head is turned slightly away from the profile. A curved, shaped eyebrow leads down from above the eye. The jaw is loose with mouth slightly open. The hair is dark and swept back falling to a neatly cut shape just below the ear and along the line of the jaw. There are streaks of grey that lead down from the top towards the darker tone of the main body of hair that is tucked behind the ear. Light falls on the top of the outer ear and the lobe, in which sits a small round pearl. The collar and lapel of the jacket curve around marking the edge of the chest. The rest of the jacket falls back, countering the movement of the body. The near arm hangs down directly un-creased to the seam of the wrist cuff that is neatly sewn. The hand emerges downwards further holding a large shopping bag. The letters T – O – P can be read along the side. The handle encircles the wrist and causes the middle figure to protrude in the act of grasping, to form a strangely shaped stump. A large, leather shoulder bag hangs down from the far side, hovering above the double yellow lines marked on the pavement. The back leg is firmly planted on the ground; it wears a dark leather shoe. The front leg moves forwards, the heel lightly touching the pavement with the shadow of the shoe appearing briefly beneath it as it steps down. The woman is about to pass between a traffic cone and a street bollard, heading towards a collection of passers-by that are walking in the direction of a bus.



(man wearing glasses)

A man is passing to the right between a street bollard and a traffic cone. He is close by and cropped immediately beneath the knee. The head is turned away from the profile following his line of sight. The left arm is held aloft and remains suspended in the middle ground. It is in clear focus with the fingers visibly emerging out of the cuff of the sleeve of a light toned jacket. A well-formed thumbnail draws attention as it comes close to touching the tip of the forefinger. The other fingers incline towards themselves with only the centre two touching. The head is rounded with a close shave of grey hair that emphasizes the light falling on the back, top and forehead. He wears heavy glasses that sit on the bridge of the nose and obscure the eyes. He appears to be looking in the direction of a young girl and her mother who have paused in the middle of the pavement ahead. The girl stands, wearing socks and sandals, with an umbrella propped between her knees. She looks down, face obscured by falling hair, into the top of an open crisp packet. The mother stops momentarily and watches; she holds several full plastic bags in both hands. The bags have the word Iceland written on them. Between the man, the girl and her mother stands a traffic cone. In the foreground, the near pocket of the ample, light toned casual jacket, gapes open revealing the space where a hand could go. The coat is out of focus, softening the modalities of tones that describe the shape of the fabric. From behind the curve of the sloping shoulder appears a woman walking in the opposite direction. In front of the face a man walks away, his back heel leading the eye towards the extended left hand that appears to be singular for a moment.



A CONVERSATION OCCURS

After writing I speak. My voice reminds me of the stuttering voice of Charles Bovary and the loud voice of Flaubert, of his *Gueuloir*¹⁵ as he worked on his novel. Sometimes it is an unclear murmur seeking its way and at others a defiant shout. My voice becomes a space where image and word might hold onto each other invisibly for a moment, and then loose each other. Each repetition brings a different kind of encounter.

I look for a voice through which to describe these photographs so that others may hear them. I find another voice, his voice and record the descriptions. I play the recordings alongside each other. The voices start to converse as I converse with ideas about the relation between the voice and the photographs. The conversation oscillates. I hear other voices, the voice of Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay *Distinct Oscillation*¹⁶ and Maurice Blanchot speaking in *The Infinite Conversation*.¹⁷ Alongside these voices and during this thinking I listen to his voice speaking my photographs, which leads me to think that you might hear them too.

'To write is not to give speech to be seen. The game of common etymology makes writing a cutting movement, a tear, a crisis... Yet speaking like writing engages us in a separating movement, an oscillating and vacillating departure.'¹⁸

15 Michael Freid, *Flaubert's Gueuloir, Madame Bovary and Salambo* (Yale University Press, 2012). Flaubert would read his work aloud during the process of editing to reduce repetition and control the rhythm and flow of his writing.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York Fordham University Press, 1995) p.63.

17 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) p.28.

18 Ibid., p.28.

N. *Does it follow then, that the text pronounced excludes images? I am not so sure. The speaking voice has its own form of sonorous image. See for yourself: when I say "sonorous", do you not have an image?*¹⁹

I wonder in response to the wondrous relationship between word and image that Jean-Luc Nancy describes. I think about the imagined sound of the stuttering hat. I think about my voice and Flaubert's voice, both spoken and internal, as I encounter the text.

N. *The voice draws the eye.*²⁰

I am drawn to the text, to the eye in the text. I am drawn to the imagined voice of the text. I encounter this voice through my own as I read, out loud. I think about Nancy's voice in relation to Flaubert. I think about the hat but I don't see it. I think about the absent image of the hat, the stuttering voice. I think about the failure of image and voice, their inability to make themselves present through the conveyance of their means. I am eavesdropping on this oscillating conversation, overhearing traces. Between this conversation and the ovoid stuttering vision of 'Charbovari' I move from eye, to I to mouth and come across my interest in what constitutes an image. This faciality of viewing and thinking is confronting another faciality: a flat and seemingly endless surface of image that expands beyond the edges of looking and describing. I think about image showing itself to the text as Charles Bovary, on the edges of concealment, behind the door, beneath the hat.

N. *It is always drawing and pulling.*²¹

Between these voices and encounters sounds echo an awkward construction that could be an image, a stuttering image, the sound of the un-sayable (mumbling) conveying the sense of the un-seeable. Something appears. I appear to be encountering something of the image in place of a lack. Voice and image simultaneously show that they reveal and conceal. The hat that fails to speak and yet appears to speak, shows this tension, marking the space between word and image.

N. *The oscillator, then, swings between mouth and face, between speech and vision, between the emission of sense and the reception of form. But what appears to move toward an encounter does not do so at all: on the contrary, the mouth and the look are turned forward and are parallel, turned into the distance, toward an infinite perpetuation of their double and incommunicable position. Between mouth and eye, the entire face oscillates.*²²

B. *Even more than that perhaps: it is as though we were turned away from the visible, without being turned back round toward the invisible. I don't know whether what I am saying says anything. But nevertheless it is simple. Speaking is not seeing. Speaking frees thought from the optical imperative...*²³

I swing towards Charles' hat as I move between looking, writing and speaking it. I ask – how does an image speak? How can I speak when confronted by a stuttering image? What emerges beyond this process of description? Does the image remain?

B. *That is illumination: image envelops text, which conceals itself from it; text devours image, which emerges from it intact. The words appear to be there only in order to portray their own silence.*²⁴

I write over photographs of passers by I have made. I draw and mark their surface, speaking the words I have inscribed. Each process feeds back into the next, only to resist any comfortable notion of an image. I think about Flaubert's aspiration: 'I would like to write a book about nothing, a book without external links, which would be held together by the internal force of its own style... a book with almost no subject matter or at least whose subject would be almost invisible if that is possible'²⁵. When I think about an invisible form of writing, I think about quiet or silence, a novel that softly speaks or silently stutters about the image. I wonder if through describing the image I can't approach that point. Looking back at the photographs and descriptions you have encountered it was Charles Bovary, the stuttering man who can't control his hat or speak his name that led me to make them. He stands for the relation between image and text, incapable of crossing the threshold, he gesticulates awkwardly between. The photographs were made in an attempt to depict an encounter and in doing so they fail. They were made to be described, written and then spoken by another. They were made in order to think about how an exhausted image can take place.

'When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer... then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When a language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent.'²⁶

19 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995) p.64.

20 Ibid., p.65.

21 Ibid.

22 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995) p.73.

23 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: Minnesota University Press) p.27.

24 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995) p.76.

25 Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence 2 Vols.* ed. Jean Breneau (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliotheche de al Pleiade, 1980) p.161-162.

26 Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Micheal A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.110.



'An amalgam in any case will not remedy the split. To see, perhaps, is to forget to speak; and to speak is to draw from the depths of speech an inexhaustible forgetfulness. Let me add that we do not await just any language, but the one in which 'error' speaks: the speech of detour.'²⁷

²⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (London: University of Minnesota Press) p.28.

LABOR ANONYMOUS

LABOR ANONYMOUS

I LOOK

THE PROBLEM OF PRONOUNS

PRONOUNS

FACE

ANONYMITY

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS OBVERSE

LABOUR ANONYMOUS

I receive a package in the post.
I unwrap it, hastily, scratching at the zealous construction of cardboard and tape.
I smell the musty scent of old paper.

Out of the disarray emerges an edition of Fortune Magazine
from 1946.

I turn the pages impatiently looking for the sequence of photographs.

I glimpse old advertisements and articles.

I move without structure through the magazine until I reach,
the middle,

and the figures I have been waiting to encounter.

THEY APPEAR,

spanning across the double page spread,

like a contact sheet.

I start to scan the pages, settling on details and then moving on.

I begin at the top left hand corner and quickly move

from left

to right

and then continue

but in a more

circular manner,

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between the images,

back to the TITLE to settle and reflect.

and then on again...

I can't remember when I first saw these photographs. They have been in my mind alongside my photographic practice and for a while I didn't look closely at them. I moved towards making photographs of passers by slowly, I stood in the street, in places that were familiar; where I might in a sense pass myself by. I let the camera frame an encounter between myself and a passer-by. I chose an element within the furniture of the street, a drain-cover, a bollard or a mark on the ground, and made an exposure when someone passed by that point. The point became a place of encounter and of disappearance, a drain hole in the image.¹ I continued with this work alongside a close reading of the *Labor Anonymous* photographs by Walker Evans, seeking to make a photographic sentence, to construct a visual syntax out of my encounters. The photographs are a counterbalance to what I am writing and showing here, another side or face to my thinking.²

I LOOK

I look at Walker Evans' photographs, passers-by from the past, photographed by him. I look at them in order to think about how the photograph can constitute a space of encounter. The closer I look the more I am concerned with his attempt to convey an encounter and to structure it through the relationship between the camera, the photograph and the word. I think about his position, another I, another eye. I think about the relationship between him and his subject, separated and missed, removed as me and you, encountering each other through the image in the viewfinder. He would have experienced the moments before and after the photographs were taken, but in the moment of taking them, an equivalence forms between us, we others.³

In looking at and writing about Walker Evans photographs I hope to convey a response through the careful construction of words and images. I also seek to encounter the photographs that were not selected and shown in *Fortune Magazine*, to re-encounter and re-view.

By encounter, I mean a meeting of one body with another that brings to light a question of relation, this could occur through the surface of the photograph.

¹ 'Rather it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2009) p.279.

² I am referring to the sequence of photographs illustrated in the previous chapter: *A Sentence, 12 Photographs of Passers by*, made outside Iceland, Brixton, 2010.

³ 'Nous Autres' in *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Jeff Fort (Fordham University Press, New York, 2005). In this chapter Nancy discusses the relation between I and 'we others' in terms of the photograph and the photographic act which resonates with my attempt to navigate the use of pronouns in describing Walker Evans photographs.

So I look.

Beyond my memory of these images, I see them spread out on the page, sepia toned and musty. These figures are strangely familiar, striding forward, at a perpendicular angle, mostly unaware of Walker Evans and his camera, definitely unaware of you and me. Sequentially laid out on the printed page, they pass by.

Yet they remain in their passing and bring to light questions about what it is to encounter another being, what it is to encounter an image and what the role of the photograph can be in presenting these encounters.



I encounter something of Walker Evans, of his look as he encounters these figures, something of you and what you may see and something of the figures and what they might have seen. We, you and I unsettle each other. Through looking and writing, I describe and reflect. I move between the voices and faces of others. I listen. I listen to you, for you, gradually moving towards my response, my description.

Within the layout of the page in *Fortune Magazine*, images are presented in portrait form spanning two layers of six across a double-page spread. As such they appear to embody a contact sheet from a roll of medium format film: conceptually and mechanically a structured sequence. They are cropped from their original format; the space is closed in on the 3/4 view of the figures, cropping the space of the street to form a portrait.⁴

All of the images, bar one, are of men broadly of working age, a typology of working maleness. The editorial copy, written by Bill Furth with the approval of Evans, forms a description and account of the sequence.⁵ The final image is of a couple adding a sense of uncertainty to the typology of the previous passers-by. The couple bring an air of informality and leisure, companionship and dialogue into the more didactic character of the previous sequence. Certainty is followed by uncertainty, intention appears to be undermined and undone. The bold heading LABOR ANONYMOUS is quickly challenged by the descriptive secondary heading: 'On a Saturday afternoon in down town Detroit'.⁶ Sans serif: word as image, is countered by the more literary form of the font that follows. Statement is followed by circumstance and fact, the facts of the previous statement being overtly challenged: Does a Saturday afternoon fall within normal laboring hours?⁷ What does the labor of the photographs themselves constitute as a record of human encounter?

⁴ In the Walker Evans archive the negatives from this series of photographs appear in both square and rectangular format, already cropped in their negative form. www.metmuseum.org

⁵ Evans wrote most of his editorial text, but was not formally credited until 1948. He wrote many drafts for this editorial text but the final one was completed by Bill Furth with the approval of Evans. Many thanks to David Campy for clearing up this question of authorship during his recent visit to the Walker Evans Archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art whilst researching his book on Walker Evans work for *Fortune Magazine* due to be published in 2013.

⁶ Walker Evans, *Fortune Magazine* (November 1946).

⁷ I think of George Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grand Jatte*, Paris. 1884.



I picture Evans standing opposite a blank wall in down town Detroit. He used a medium format Rollieflex camera, held at waist height. He looked down into the viewfinder from above, and would have seen the image in reverse. The focus was preset, as was the exposure, to ensure consistency and enable this removal, this distancing of the scene through the apparatus. With the camera removed from his eye, he faced his subject separately, but in the moment of making the photograph, he would have looked into the viewfinder inverted and horizontal, and faced their image. Unlike the subway photographs, the camera is not concealed, it is visibly present, both to the subjects of the photograph and implicitly in our viewing of them now. It is in retrospect, through looking at the photographs, selecting and editing them that Evans starts to engage with the complexity of human relations that they convey.⁸ It is when we look at them that the photograph offers itself as a space between beings.

Looking at the photographs now it seems that the image exists between us all, as a degree of separation and encounter, creating an equivalence of relations. Through the camera Evans sees the inverted image that separates him from the subjects. In the pages of *Fortune Magazine*, we see the image reconstituted and yet feel the absence of Evans and the apparatus he used. The subjects themselves are as ignorant of us, *we others*, as we are of them, yet they hold a privileged position in relation to history and their possible awareness of both Evans and his camera. The photographs open up a space between subject — viewer—photographer — camera in a way that calls into question, or extends a question towards the meaning of encountering another being. As such, the photographic image constitutes a space of encounter and also one on non-encounter: as Evans encounters the subjects as an image, so do we, and yet here, their image remains in passing, as does the anticipation of their presence.

⁸ Evans made these photographs during his 1946 visit to the Ford River Rouge plant in Michigan, an assignment for *Fortune Magazine*. There is a relation between these photographs and a previous series *Many Are Called* taken on the underground trains of New York in 1938, where Evans photographed passengers secretly through the crack of his jacket. Both sequences are self-initiated and are therefore removed from direct journalistic intentionality. It seems that their construction follows a more exploratory and reflective mode.



In *Fortune Magazine*, the close crop of the images centralises the figure in the frame. This centrality of subject exposes the shifting tonalities of the background, which tilts, darkens and softens according to the changes of position and perspective taking place through the camera. The seams in the panels of the wall move angles and directions. The shadow in the top right corner appears and encroaches in some images whilst disappearing in others. The blankness of the grey is counterbalanced by the texture of the surface of the plywood stud wall. It has a sensual quality. It acts as a studio backdrop would to emphasise the qualities and tones of grey within the prints. It reveals and absorbs simultaneously.

ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON IN
DOWNTOWN DETROIT

The American worker, as he passes here, generally unaware of Walker Evans' camera, is a decidedly various fellow. His blood flows from many sources. His features tend now toward the peasant and now toward the patrician. His hat is sometimes a hat, and sometimes he has molded it into a sort of defiant signature. It is this variety, perhaps, that makes him, in the mass, the most resourceful and versatile body of labor in the world. If the war proved anything, it demonstrated that American labor can learn new operations with extraordinary rapidity and speedily carry them to the highest pitch of productive efficiency. There may often be a lack of the craftsmanly traditions of the Older Worlds, but the wide spectrum of temperaments rises to meet almost any challenge; in labor, as in investment portfolios, diversification pays off.

Another thing may be noticed about these street portraits. Most of the men on these pages would seem to have a solid degree of self-possession. By the grace of providence and the efforts of millions, including themselves, they are citizens of a victorious and powerful nation, and they appear to have preserved a sense of themselves as individuals. When editorialists lump them as "labor," these laborers can no doubt laugh that one off.

The editorial copy, like the photographic sequence, is in two parts, the second more various and less stable than the first. A key sentence from the editorial text describes the object being transformed by the subject. 'A hat is sometimes a hat, and sometimes he has moulded it into a sort of defiant signature'. This sentence is reminiscent of opening descriptive passage in the novel *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. The hat is simultaneously object and quality and becomes a metonymic form for the figure as it does for Charles Bovary at the opening of Flaubert's novel. This reflection on the object describes something that the photographic image does in relation to its subject and in relation to our position as viewers and in turn, subjects in viewing. The qualities and details of the image move from their place as components of a subject and an image, towards us who view them.



I consider this metonymic relation between image and quality as constituted in the notion of the photographic surface, as obverse, presenting its preferred side or meaning, whilst simultaneously containing its reverse, its other possibilities. It is as if it can look in two directions at once, or, in looking at the image, we look more than once.

The passage ends with an insistence on the individuality of the subjects: '*When editorialists lump them as 'labor', these laborers can no doubt laugh that one off.*'¹⁰

So who and what are these people?

What constitutes them?

Is it their relation to us here and now?

What is *labor*?

Anonymity and specificity collide and create an uncertainty of human relations. The descriptive text establishes uncertainty. It challenges the authority of the images in that they require an account. It gives voice to the sequence only to lay bare the uncertainty of that voice. The text enables the photographs to move beyond their context, as illustrations for some kind of *labor*. It calls the photograph into question as a space of uncertainty between beings.

'Obverse, a. turned towards one; of leaves, having a narrower base than the apex, forming a counterstatement, complementary. n. the face or front; the side of a coin or medal bearing the main device; the counterpart or complementary side or aspect of a statement, fact etc. obversely, adv. obversion, n. in logic, a method of immediate inference by reversing the predicate and changing the quality of a proposition. Obvert, v.t. to turn the front towards one; in logic, to infer the obverse of (a proposition).'⁹

Evans working titles for the series show him thinking through the dynamics of their relationship to himself and to the camera. Lists and unused titles for this project include:

'Photographic rendezvous with 24 working people.

One street corner, one afternoon, 24 people.

24 people exchange glances with a camera.

A silent exchange of glances with 24 workers.

...Machine-oilers or stock-runners, truckers,

loaders, or short-order cooks pass you here.

Some may be worried, some just blank in the

smooth waters of prosperity. All are — at a safe

guess — your anonymous producers.'¹¹

These descriptive phrases frame a space of encounter in terms of the image and separation in terms of the photograph. The rendezvous is mutual; glances occur between people, some kind of exchange is recorded. The camera is present between both the photographer and the passers-by; there is an equivalence in their relationship to it. Following on from the photographic event, the image takes its place between us, as viewers, Walker Evans as photographer and the figures on the other side of the lens. We are all separated by the photograph, and find some kind of commonality in the space of the image.

I wonder about Evans' editorial gesture, his curation of these encounters and the notion of anonymous production. I think about the subjects that were not chosen. Evans selection of these 11 photographs and single text seems to remove subjectivity from them, to enable their qualities to float or exist with a degree of singularity. Through Evans photographic look they have been re-positioned and given a different purpose. I attempt to write about my relation to them and in doing so I describe them, editing down the descriptions and removing any personal pronouns from them. I seek to unsettle the relation between image and text and show the separation between us all, in order to produce an anonymous sequence of words.

⁹ Cassell's *English Dictionary* (Cassell: London, 1989).

¹⁰ 'Labor Anonymous', *Fortune Magazine*, November 1946, p.152 – 153.

¹¹ *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology*, ed. Jeff L. Rosenheim (Scalo, New York, 2000) p.198.

THE PROBLEM OF PRONOUNS

I write towards the anonymity of the *Fortune Magazine* sequence; observe them, describe them. I crop and select sections of the images that both expose and reveal my descriptions. In looking at these photographs I think about what constitutes anonymity. I trace the surface of the images gathering together lengthy descriptions and reduce them to a collection of phrases that equate to their shape and form. I work with a sense of encounter. I reduce the text to a series of statements, sentences almost. I take fragments and use them to describe what can't be seen and suggest what can, with no attribution or ownership. The qualities in each photograph float free of association. I remove all of the possessive pronouns in an attempt to open up a space of anonymity, to allow the qualities within the photographs to reach out towards us.



man in a broad rimmed hat

A man stares out from beneath a broad rimmed hat.
 Sun hits the bridge of a large nose.
 The corners of the mouth turn down.
 Loose overalls cover the contours of the body.
 The front pockets sag open.
 Two packages are held in the crook of the left arm.
 A large hand curves around them.
 Veins interlace between fingers and thumb.



man smoking a pipe

A man stares ahead underneath a frown of dark eyebrows.
 A vein joins the hairline to the rim of the left eye.
 A pipe is clenched between two lips.
 The jaw and cheek are tense with effort.
 The shirt strains causing crease lines beneath the armpit.
 A grey jacket drapes over a bent left arm.
 A hand protrudes, fingers tucked in.
 It is holding an envelope.



man in a hat and sunglasses

A man walks forwards with lips pursed.
 The face is contorted around the mouth.
 Sunglasses shade the eyes.
 Trousers are held up by belt and braces.
 Creases fall over the top of the waist.
 Shirtsleeves are loosely rolled to the elbow.
 The underside of the forearms are exposed to light.
 A thin moustache lines the lip.



man smoking a cigar

A man is about to grasp a cigar held in the mouth.
 Fingers and thumb hover in mid-air.
 The man is wearing circular sunglasses,
 a white shirt and a tight, thin necktie.
 The jaw drops in the act of inhalation.
 The left arm is hidden under the drape of a grey, wool jacket.
 Something is held in its crook.
 It is indistinguishable and strange.



man in a straw hat

A man walks forwards with sloping shoulders.
Hands are hidden inside trouser pockets.
A collared white shirt falls open around the neck.
The Adam's apple emerges from the shade beneath the chin.
A neatly cut moustache traces the top lip.
The eyes look into the middle distance.
The man is wearing a straw hat.
Light shines through its woven rim.



man with a bowed head

A man is passing with head bowed and hair parted on the left.
Two eyes look down towards a closed and solemn mouth.
A large jacket is fastened by the lower button.
The fabric curves across the front into creases along the side.
The left lapel curls forwards forming a dark shadow.
The hands are cropped.
They hang down,
fingers falling out of the frame.



man in a hat smoking a cigarette

A man is looking out from the shade of the rim of a trilby hat.
 It has a bright rectangular badge on the front.
 A pair of eyes look forwards and outwards, actively.
 The lips, slightly parted, hold a half-smoked cigarette.
 The face is handsome, like a movie star.
 The short-sleeved shirt is thickly crumpled,
 contrasting the precision of the shape of the hat.
 The arms angle forwards from the elbow.



man wearing dungarees

A man is wearing a soft, flat cap and looking straight ahead.
 The eyes are obscured by shadow.
 The mouth is half-open with large white teeth.
 Light falls on the lobe of the left ear.
 The shirt is loose and ample.
 The body is clad in denim dungarees with a large front pocket.
 Inside sits a folded piece of paper.
 The arms hang down, long and relaxed.



man smoking a pipe

A man looks ahead with half-closed eyes.
 The mouth curves upwards, pursed, exhaling smoke,
 which floats in the air in front of the face.
 The eyebrows are furrowed, frowning.
 A crumpled shirt is rolled up to the elbows.
 The pocket sags open.
 Above sits a round badge, plain and faded.
 A hand grasps the bottom of a pipe, elegantly suspended in mid-air.



man in a white t-shirt

A man is walking forwards with his chest puffed out.
 The dark hair is wavy and vigorous.
 The eyes look into the middle distance with intent.
 A cigarette hangs from between the lips.
 The edge of the mouth curves, holding it in place.
 Light falls on the ear defining its contours and recesses.
 The forearm swings forwards,
 it is blurred and hairy.



a couple

A couple walk past.
One is talking, mouth half open, speaking.
The other is listening, head bowed, looking down.
A hand hangs in the air, an emphatic gesture.
Another hand is held behind a back.
Both wear belts. They appear relaxed, at leisure.
The short hair is neatly parted and waves to the right side.
The long hair is loose, natural and pulled together at the top.





PRONOUNS

Now I turn to the individual photographs. It seems to me that in the process of selecting and editing, the qualities and their subjects have been brutally separated. I want to view the photographs in a more intact state, if this is possible. This forces me to move to a time before they constituted a magazine spread. I look for the photographs in the archive of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They seem more familiar to me, closer to the way in which I view my own photographs, closer to the anonymous figures of today, that span simultaneously in virtual space. Removed, through the screen of my computer, I am able to search for the negatives and look for these laborers. I feel my intrusion on the negatives, the raw photographs in their unpublished form, before cropping, selecting and editing.¹² The square format of the original negatives gives space and context to the figures. I am also aware of their greater diversity, a different kind of group than that of the printed page. The archive presents a less certain typology, a greater diversity of age, class and gender. I wonder what is being made present in the faces of these anonymous characters? I am closer to them, as if their anonymity speaks to me. I want to write towards these figures as an expression of our relation and I set about it through the relation of pronouns, carefully articulated to expose the space between the photograph, the camera and ourselves. I encounter all 150 of the photographs present in the archive. They are doubly anonymous in some ways, they remain unseen and unchosen, out of view. Yet it feels as if an encounter occurs. I am surprised to uncover an intimacy in these figures, through our mutual anonymity. I respond to this intimacy through writing, writing towards them, giving them presence. I describe them all.

¹² Evans regularly cropped his negatives before cropping them in the dark room. This is unusual in the sense that the negative is normally left as untouched and as preserved as possible. Evans did not do most of his printing at *Fortune* and it is well documented that he was uncomfortable about the process of handing over his negatives. Cropping them initially exerts an elemental degree of control.



1. I look at his face, closed eyes, closed mouth.
2. His open hand is moving towards a cigar.
3. She frowns, holding a large white package in her left arm.
4. They talk, arms gesturing, smiling.
5. He looks beyond us, into the light.
6. He is close, almost touching, his chin drawn back.
7. He looks towards me but I can't see his eyes.
8. He looks back, body twisting, half smiling.
9. She looks forwards, her arm reaching the edge of the frame.
10. I look at her profile, her frown and her body.
11. I look at her face and the face on the magazine she holds in her arm.
12. As they pass by a shadow falls across their bodies.
13. Her arm swings back, she draws upwards.
14. He looks ahead blankly, wearing a polka-dot tie.
15. I can see his eyes underneath the shade of his hat; we look at each other.
16. She smiles through her sunglasses as if she knows me.
17. Light touches her face from in front.
18. He looks unaware and sad.
19. His eyes look towards the camera with suspicion.
20. She is walking away wearing an incongruous hat.
21. He looks at us directly, his lips are parted.
22. He looks as if he knows he is being watched.
23. She looks upwards, into the light.
24. He turns his head and looks directly at the camera.
25. His head swings around, chin drawn in and eyebrow raised.

26. The photograph frames his awkward expression: eyes closed, lip bitten.
27. He looks back from the edge of the frame, mouth half open revealing teeth.
28. One looks towards the camera, the other blinks.
29. He walks in the opposite direction wearing a checked woollen jacket.
30. They pass arm in arm; she looks ahead, he squints into the light.
31. The line of a straw hat cuts between his nose and closed mouth.
32. He looks ahead, there are two pens clipped to his jacket pocket.
33. As he looks, his tongue touches the corner of his mouth.
34. He is dressed in white, except for a black button at his collar.
35. A young girl in the foreground is obscuring the face of her mother.
36. He looks down with a troubled face.
37. A shadow falls into the space between their shoulders.
38. He looks directly into the light, which falls onto the knuckle of his left hand.
39. His eyes are down cast; he holds a brown paper bag.
40. His face is brightly lit revealing veins and creases.
41. A cigar extends out from his lips; another sits in the shirt pocket.
42. She looks out.
43. She is caught, mouth open, right hand swinging forward.
44. A man looks towards the camera frowning; he holds a folded newspaper.
45. A floral printed dress covers her substantial body.
46. One looks at the wall; the other, on wooden crutches, smiles at the camera.
47. His face is blurred; the peak of his cap points directly upwards.
48. She looks down, close by and grasps a brown paper bag.
49. His left hand is half hidden inside a trouser pocket.
50. He looks ahead, into the light, grasping a belt with his right hand.

51. A shadow is cast beneath the nose; it covers his open mouth.
52. He looks at the camera; I count the holes in his belt.
53. He looks out; light falls on the veins on the inside of his right arm.
54. She wears a large black dress that is embroidered around the neck.
55. He holds a long slim pipe between his teeth.
56. He looks out through round metal-rimmed glasses.
57. He looks towards the camera with rolled sleeves and a quiff.
58. He looks with mild suspicion; a shadow crosses his left thigh.
59. She looks ahead, her hand reaches out of the frame towards me.
60. His left arm swings forwards, fingers reaching outwards.
61. He looks at the camera; his blurred hand touches the edge of the frame.
62. His eyes look down; a thin clipped moustache traces his top lip.
63. He carries a half smoked cigarette propped between the lips.
64. The middle button holds his jacket together.
65. Their arms are delicately arranged, one looks out towards the camera.
66. Her hair is plaited; there are flowers on her dress.
67. A man looks out beyond a blurred hand; he is wearing a waistcoat.
68. She squints as a man's eye appears on the right side of the frame.
69. He looks ahead beneath a straw hat.
70. He looks towards us, his body turning.
71. She looks through sunglasses; beneath the frame they hold hands.
72. A large expanse of grey fills the frame; it is the back of a man.
73. The curls of her hair sit in relief against the plywood wall.
74. His mouth is open: jaw dropped, eyebrows raised.
75. She looks down, beneath a black straw hat; a cross of fabric sits on top.

76. She wears checks and lipstick, his large patterned tie appears on the right.
77. One looks ahead, holding her forefinger in her hand; the other smiles.
78. The swing of his arms spread across the width of the frame.
79. One looks down, smiling, grasping her arms; the other wears a floral dress.
80. Two ladies pass by; on the far side, in focus, she looks out, frowning.
81. He approaches the centre in a white shirt, straw-hat and grey trousers.
82. There are light stitches on his denim shirt and creases on his sleeve.
83. His light double-breasted jacket has large lapels; he wears a moustache.
84. His hair is slicked back; he holds a crumpled paper bag.
85. He turns towards me, looking down, sleeves rolled up to his shoulder.
86. He looks towards the camera, wearing a trilby hat.
87. A man passes in front of the camera; he has a pensive expression.
88. A man looks at the camera, his mouth turned down; he has dark eyebrows.
89. A young man walks forwards, his eyes looking straight ahead.
90. A small section of hair stands up from the back of his head.
91. He wears a double-breasted jacket and an old style hat.
92. She looks towards us, her face framed by curled hair.
93. He is wearing a checked shirt-style jacket and a striped bow tie.
94. A man strides forwards swinging an army coat in his left arm.
95. He looks down over a hooked nose, thinking.
96. His eyes are shaded and blurred; his hand reaches towards a collar.
97. His eyes glance in this direction, his hand mirrored by another on the right.
98. Two young women walk past, one wearing checks and the other stripes.
99. His head is bent and his eyebrows form a frown.
100. She passes close by, head bowed and eyes closed.

101. He looks towards the camera with a frown.
102. One wears a white t-shirt, the other a checked shirt, they are not together.
103. A man walks past in a striped suit with three buttons on his cuff sleeve.
104. They both look down, together.
105. He looks towards us as he reaches to scratch his nose.
106. He looks directly at the camera, he has identical bracelets around each wrist.
107. He looks ahead with parted lips; five buttons are visible on his jacket front.
108. His trilby curves from the back of his neck to just below his eye.
109. Her arm hovers in mid-air as she speaks; he looks down, listening.
110. He looks towards us, through dark sunglasses.
111. A man stares at the camera, face on.
112. There is a tattoo on his left forearm and he is wearing braces.
113. She is blurred, her headscarf falls down towards the face of a girl.
114. He looks over his glasses, the headline of his newspaper reads: 'cuts'.
115. On the far side he looks down, on the nearside, he looks at the camera.
116. A man passes wearing a flat cap, glasses and a crumpled shirt.
117. She is blurred with the face of a man and woman in focus on either side.
118. She wears pearls and earrings; he wears a geometric tie.
119. He walks forwards, head bowed, fingers falling out of the frame.
120. His hand hovers over a cigar as he looks ahead through circular sunglasses.
121. He walks leaning forwards, head bowed, hands cropped at the wrist.
122. He looks out over the camera, his nose marks the centre of the image.
123. He wears a flat cap and dungarees; his open mouth suggests a smile.
124. His arms swing, head down; he is cropped at the waist.
125. He looks from beneath a broad-rimmed hat; sun hits the bridge of his nose.

- I26. His hand hovers, reaching inside a sharply pressed suit.
- I27. He notices the camera as he walks past smoking a cigarette.
- I28. He looks forwards, his hand thrust into his trouser pocket.
- I29. His eyes look out beneath a trilby hat; he inhales firmly on a cigarette.
- I30. He wears a checked shirt; the weave of his straw hat is illuminated.
- I31. He looks through round, dark metal-rimmed sunglasses with pursed lips.
- I32. He exhales smoke; she looks towards the camera.
- I33. He looks down to the floor with his head tilted and bottom lip protruding.
- I34. She looks upwards anxiously, out of the frame, clutching a large paper bag.
- I35. A man strides forwards looking back over his left shoulder.
- I36. His left arm is blurred; his right hand is in sharp focus.
- I37. He looks down towards the camera with *The Detroit* under his arm.
- I38. The shapes of his face suggest different potential expressions.
- I39. One looks up to the sky brushing her hair with her hand, the other stares out.
- I40. A man walks towards the camera smoking a cigar.
- I41. A woman looks downwards with plaited hair and a striped dress.
- I42. Her hat is circular, tilted to the side and covered in a dark veil.
- I43. A man looks directly at the camera; he has deep lines on his face.
- I44. A woman walks forwards in a dark dress with flowers pinned to her collar.
- I45. He has almost left the frame.
- I46. He casts a look backwards; he is wearing a watch and a wedding ring.
- I47. I look upwards at his profile as he squints into the light.
- I48. A man passes in exact profile with a thin moustache.
- I49. He is looking straight ahead.
- I50. He looks upwards out of the frame lifting his right hand into the air.

Through writing these photographs I invoke others. I grasp a sense of his look and a sense of your look. We all sense the limit of our looks, and of our encounter. Without the photographic image this encounter would have no presence at all. Between these photographs and the words I find to express them is a negotiation of the relation between word and image in terms of the photograph and human encounter. The photograph presents itself as obverse, as an insistent surface that does not reveal, but contains its reversal and its refusal, its revelation, exposed: between us, as a separation.

Whilst looking and writing, the voices of others resound and I have listened to them in thinking about these photographs. Reading Emmanuel Levinas, I pass between one and another. I sense something of the relations between us, a problem of relations and of pronouns, where being is not constituted within subjectivity, but beyond it. I also listen to the voice of Maurice Blanchot in the *Infinite Conversation* reflecting on different notions of light and speech. I am faced with the photographic encounter. Between these other voices, between you and me, pronouns become unsettled, as does subjectivity. Do we all become others? Do we all become subjects?

Is there a common space between us? I address these questions through writing. Words endeavour to express a confusion of relations, unsettled and unsure.

'A Mobile-immobile relation, untold and without number, not indeterminate but indetermining, always in displacement, being without a place, and such that it seems to draw-repel an 'I' into leaving its site or its role — which, nonetheless, the 'I' must maintain, having become nomadic and anonymous in an abysmal space of resonance and condensation.'¹³

13 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p.67.

FACE

In the Walker Evans archive, the position of the figures is less fixed. The angles shift, the body intervenes, there is no crop to fix these images into a static and rigidly repeated position and so the repetition is less certain. I prefer this uncertainty. The conceptual rigor of the structure is allowed to breathe. A human element is allowed in, a sense of touch. I look at the figures and in looking I face them. In facing them I think about my face, the faces of those I encounter, the face of the camera. I think about the face of the photograph, the space of the image. I am faced by these things — by a set of relations that I want to pull apart, that are brought together in the act of looking. I work through the archive looking for individual figures. There are many who look directly at the camera, or the photographer, many more couples, women, older people: a greater diversity of type. In looking particular qualities arise from within the photographs. Some seem to stay in their place, and I wonder about their time. Some seem to look as if I had just passed them. Some invite me to look closely without a sense of intrusion, I reach out to touch the texture of their sleeve, or grasp the paper bag they are holding. Some look like friends. I look closely at the photographs and try to describe their qualities. I start by talking through them, speaking to myself of what I see. I converse with the still image from the archive. I do not encounter these photographs face-to-face but I do face them. We face them. They remain in their passing but present a face.



I look at his face, at the lines and the shapes. I look at his skin, and the veins on his left forearm. His hat is both defined and battered. There is something perfectly circular in his shirt pocket. He looks towards the camera, towards you and me. Light catches the light of his left eye. I think about my face, I am aware of the surface of my skin as I look at the photograph, I am aware of the act of looking. I can just see the hazy profile of my nose. The photograph faces me, invokes my face. Between us all, there is a face, or a question of face. It seems like the photographic surface contains this question, that the question is contained within it. The face within the photograph calls me to account for myself as a face, calls me to question what it is to encounter a face. The photographs face us. The face within the photograph challenges and struggles with the photographic surface, it resists and reaches out. The face captivates but does not reveal itself. It presents its own secrecy or muteness. It appears. The face reveals the photographic surface, as obverse — the essence of which is supported by the reverse, not revealed by it.

'The everyday is our portion of eternity... Everyday man is the most atheist of men. He is such that no God whatsoever could stand in relation to him. And thus one understands how the man in the street escapes all authority, be it political, moral, or religious. — For in the everyday we are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth.'¹⁴

14 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p.245.



I look at her face and the face on the magazine she holds in her left arm. Her eyes look into the light, seemingly into the middle distance. She seems to be between expressions, as if she were about to frown or smile. Her mouth is slightly open, ajar, with chin drawn under folding the skin and casting a shadow. She wears a white short-sleeved shirt. Her left arm crosses in front of the body, the hand grasping a leather handbag with the straps crossing the back of the hand and wrist. The thin strap of a wristwatch follows down from the face printed on the magazine, forming an uncanny assemblage. The printed face looks directly out of the photograph towards us with a blank expression. Their faces invite us to converse. Through our ability to converse this photograph remains present and arresting in its passing. It passes and speaks about the ability of the photograph to present the encounter between beings, the relation of vision and language, of sensibility and the face. It presents a problem of vision, by showing us that we may access other beings through vision, but that the face resists and refuses to be contained by that vision. The face exceeds and overflows, it is uncontained.

'If the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness pre-eminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts across the vision of forms and can be stated neither in terms of contemplation nor in terms of practice. It is the face, its revelation is speech.'¹⁵

15 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.195.

ANONYMITY

I look at the words LABOR ANONYMOUS, they are challenging in relation to the photographs. What constitutes their anonymity and mine? To what labor is being referred, the labor of looking and reading, the labor of the production of the photograph and the printed page, the labor of reconfiguring their meaning to me and you?

Can a being, in itself, be anonymous? Surely it depends on being perceived as such? The photographic image and the encounter with another being suggest anonymity in that they present a relation between beings. Both the fabric of the photograph and the subject insist on something being present, not nothing, and yet both border on disappearance and withdrawal. It is the photograph that establishes anonymity and seals it. We are anonymous to each other through the photograph. These photographs insistently return to the question of anonymity. Their appearance seems infinitely foreign — singular and anonymous in relation to each other, to Evans and to you and me. Evans re-iterates the significance of encountering another through his sequence, he lays claim to anonymity and yet each singular image resists that claim, as my eye moves laterally across the surface of the sequence, something resists. Anonymity arises from within these photographs, from the texture of the grey background, the grain of the print, the creases, folds and gestures of the individual beings that resist their passing.

I turn again to the pages of Blanchot's *Infinite Conversation*, to a man without horizon and listen to him speak: '— Let's go back then. I am — to begin with what is most common — necessarily in relation with someone. This relation can be instrumental or objective, as when I seek to use someone as I might an object or even simply study him as an object of knowledge or truth. Or I can look at him in his dignity and his liberty, seeing in him another myself and wanting him to make my self freely recognized by him, being myself a self only in the free recognition that is both equal and reciprocal — a movement that is not accomplished by the sole impetus of the *belle âme*, but through labor, the discourse, and the liberating action of history. This is a long labor.'¹⁶

¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p.68.



The description below, by Emmanuel Levinas, of a subject and their image, relates to Walker Evans photographs: to the way in which they insist on describing what it is to encounter another being. It speaks to these passers-by, to the particular manner in which they are structured and composed in relation to one another, to the way in which they ask questions of their relation to the image and of what the image and human encounter have in common. These images and these encounters with another being present an essential uncertainty and a radical passivity. The texture of the photographs evokes the torn sack that Levinas describes. The subjects are peculiar in their ability to express duality or diachrony. Something is not entirely absorbed in them, something leaks out towards us. They pass-by and yet they remain, their anonymity touches us.

'Here is a person who is what he is, but does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them... There is a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relation between these two moments. We will say that thing is itself and its image...'¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Reality and its Shadow' in *Levinas Reader*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989) p.133.



There is blankness in the photographs, it defines them, and binds them together. The blank wall that the photographer chose to stand in front of is a powerful space. It is repeated and the repetition allows the individual to float free of the immediate context of the street while still confronting the fabric of the city. This repetition articulates the fixity of the photograph. The strong mid-grey tone shifts according to the light of each particular moment insisting simultaneously on repetition and singularity. The grey conveys a blank minimum of description, and yet contains intense texture and depth. The subtle shifts in tone have a sonic register that conceptually structure the work whilst bringing it out of the realm of the visual and into an aural and tactile space. The blankness is tangible. The wall contains the passer-by, yet presents them intimately in front of us. There is no horizon to escape to, only an expanse of grey. Blankness contains the simultaneous presence of beings and their qualities. A conflation between the part and the whole occurs, a synecdoche within the photographic surface. Blankness is the ground against which characteristics are formed at each particular moment. It is a modality of sense and separation.

My labour, your labour, our labour grasps, holds, touches and affects. Anonymity can be seen to be the rawness, the ability for things to dissolve and morph into a kind of groping that reveals the position of the body as simultaneously within and at the edges of being. This 'groping' seems to be an adequate term with which to think about the photographic act, the camera being an object that intrinsically links the hand and the eye, vision and touch. The photograph can be seen as a LABOR, as an act of the hand that grasps, an act that establishes and exposes the relation between beings. This act of groping is the act of the photograph achieved. Labour extends from the body towards the world. A photograph draws out this space, is this gesture.

'Groping reveals the position of the body which at the same time is integrated into being and remains at its interstices, always invited to traverse a distance at random, and maintains itself in this position all by itself. Such is the position of a separated being.'¹⁸



18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.168.

OBVERSE

In viewing these photographs we confront the image as a surface that contains an instance of human encounter. Through the term obverse, I am considering the surface of the photographs we have encountered. We become aware of these encounters as separate, removed and to a certain degree impossible. We see an impossible relation. It is this that the photograph simultaneously reveals and conceals. This is what I mean by obverse.

The figures come about and remain as a result of their interaction with light. They are a matter of light. Light mediates our encounter with them. Light comes from in front of the figures so that any shadow is cast either out of view or directly onto the figure itself. I search the figures for shadows, and find very few. Occasionally a shadow is cast onto the figures, maybe the shadow of Evans or of someone passing behind the camera. This light enables the figures to take shape against the background without their shadow obstructing or dominating the space of the image. They make an appearance. They appear in relief rather than in sculptural form, giving them the quality of a frieze or a façade. This has the effect of bringing ground and figure together, each distinctive and separate. This conflation of subject and ground enables the space of the photograph to present itself as obverse, absorbing its qualities. Components within the image take on a view, a force that presents its preferred side, refusing and containing its reverse. The obverse is exposed to light.

'One surface is offered to the gaze, and one can turn over the garment, as one reminds a coin... but does not the distinction between the obverse and the reverse bring us beyond these superficial considerations? ...The obverse would be the essence of the thing whose servitudes are supported by the reverse, where the threads are invisible...'¹⁹

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.192.



I look within the photographic image, my eye tracing the edges of the surface, looking underneath the roll of a shirtsleeve or the curl of some hair. I look into the darkness of an eye, the recesses of an ear. As my eye seeks to move beyond the surface, to the reverse side, I think of the obverse nature of the photograph. This repulsion back to the surface of the photograph leads me to invoke other senses. What I cannot reach in looking leads me back to the surface to touch in other ways, to describe.

I trace,
I draw,
I speak,
I write.

The photographic image contains and exposes our encounters, reveals their emergence.

'The connection between vision and touch, between representation and labor, remains essential. Vision moves into grasp. Vision opens upon a perspective, upon a horizon, and describes a tangible distance, invites the hand to movement and to contact, and ensures them.'²⁰

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.191.



A HEAP, A PILE, A MASS

MOMENTS OF DESCRIPTION
THE LIMITS OF DESCRIPTION
AN ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE

MOMENTS OF DESCRIPTION

I am looking for moments where visual perception is described and pursued, where the image *in* words is challenged. In Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Snapshots*¹ scenes, images and observations form small narratives that contain and contradict, in various ways, the complexity of conveying visual perception. I invite you to read with me:

The rainwater has accumulated in the hollow of a shallow depression, forming among the trees a wide pond, roughly circular in shape, some ten yards in diameter. Round about, the earth is black, without the slightest trace of vegetation between the high, straight trunks. There is neither brush nor shrubs in this part of the woods. The ground is covered only with a uniform, felt like layer made up of twigs and leaves reduced to their veins, from which a few patches of moss protrude slightly in spots, half decomposed. High above the tree trunks, the bare branches stand out sharply against the sky.

The water is transparent, though brownish in colour. Bits of debris fallen from trees – small branches, empty seed pods, pieces of bark – have lain at the bottom of the shallow pond, steeping there since the start of winter. But none of these fragments is light enough to float, to rise and break the surface, which is everywhere uniform and shiny. There is not the slightest breath of air to ruffle this immobility.

The sky has cleared. It is the end of the day. The sun is low, to the left, behind the tree trunks. Its shallowly slanting rays create, over the surface of the pond, narrow luminous bands alternating with wider dark bands.

¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'The Wrong Direction' in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.12.

'On the deep resilient ochre ground
Of aromatic hairpins
Loosed above by masses of indolent treetops.
Nothing remains but shadow splashed
with sunlight
And ribbons woven with sleepless atoms.'²

Parallel to these strips, a row of thick trees runs along the water's edge, on the opposite bank; perfect cylinders, vertical, with no low branches, they run downward in a very brilliant reflection of much greater contrast than the real subject – which by comparison seems vague, even somewhat out of focus. In the black water, the symmetrical trunks shine as if varnished. A line of light emphasizes their outlines on the sides turned towards the setting sun.

Yet this admirable landscape is not only inverted, but also discontinuous. The hatching of the sun's rays over the surface of the mirror cuts through the picture with brighter lines, equally spaced and perpendicular to the reflected tree trunks; it is as if the view there was veiled by intense lighting, revealing innumerable particles suspended in the thin top layer of water. Only the shadowed zones, where these particles are invisible, are strikingly brilliant. Thus each tree trunk is cut off, at more or less equal intervals, by a series of uncertain rings (which nevertheless suggest their real models), giving this part of the "deep down" woods a chequered appearance...³

In *The Wrong Direction*, accumulated rainwater has produced a wide pool, a small and imperceptible gathering resulting in a 'shallow depression'. This forms a circular pond surrounded by black earth constructed in negative and displaying a lack of any other constitutive qualities. The pond exists in the past tense; its accumulation asserts the previous passing of time. Things are mulched and there is bareness and exposure. The scene is set whilst the title: *The Wrong Direction* has already hinted at error, reversal and misconception. Contradiction and confusion pervade. Past tense merges into present and our eyes are led upwards from the bare featureless matter on the ground to the clarity of the sky overhead. Clarity exists almost out of view. We have to strain our necks to see it. This clarity then falls back down and touches the water where it disappears. Here, transparency is murky; objects are weighed down, trapped and unable to surface. Time and light hold them there. They are not light enough.

Time is then given to the scene as we move into the present tense. It is dusk — the sun is to the left (which I assume is West.) Bands of light and dark cover the surface of the pool, which dominates — flat and readable from left to right, upon which the light can rest. It is as if a still life has been suddenly illuminated and transformed. Quickly another perspectival transformation occurs through the inverted image. Cylinders of tree trunks ring truer in their reflection: image, holds stronger than object. The trunks shine in the water, the strength of their impact asserted despite the recognition of their inversion and discontinuity. The surface dominates and catches yet another form of light: sunlight, which scratches and obscures the previously assured inverted consistency of the view, veiling the surface with a double layer of clarity — particles, matter suspended within the image. Only shadow allows the brilliance of the reflected image to remain. There are many surfaces now, multiple images existing on top of one another, each one attempting to lay claim to the image.

² Francis Ponge, *Mute Objects of Expression*, trans. Lee Fahnestock (New York: Archipelago Books, 2008) p.102.

³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'The Wrong Direction' in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.13.

This is insistently an image. Stillness defines the surface along with inconsistency and reversal. Reading from left to right constructs the image before us as a physical presence. It is self evidently inverted, mirrored, the wrong way round: all surface. Space is flattened and objects disrupted. Edges and boundaries determine our perception. Flatness contains multiple layers. This surface stretches our thinking, moments of clarity existing at its edges or bouncing off its very reflection.

Spatial and temporal uncertainty is confused further in the form of a human presence. A greater uncertainty then occurs between us, the figure, the writer and some other viewer or reader. The image that exists between us is obscured further by our presences. The figure cannot see and neither can we. He is blinded by the sun, which confuses us. Neither of us holds the position of the narrator. We stumble towards the image on one side of its surface, just as the narrator assures us of his confusion and possible error. Does he only now observe that he has gone in the wrong direction?⁴ When he leaves the scene timelessness returns, or time leaves with him...once more the scene is empty. On the left, the sun is still at the same height, the light is unchanged...⁵ It seems as if nothing has happened.

Emptiness is a quality that is observed, and in conveying this observation the narrator includes us as witnesses. Suddenly the scene is crowded with observers viewing a lack. Words mark out a space that is ready to flip either way. The surface is a film reversing the view from either side. Words slow down and extend the process of observation between us but don't make it more stable. It is this space, across which we encounter each other, the author and possibly another viewer, that I am drawn to. The image that is constructed here seems to occupy a position between words and beings.

From the top of the hill, just after rounding the turn marked by three or four pine trees standing apart from the little woods, one can see straight ahead down the road as far as the jetty, with the arm of the sea to the right, and the island, which is not yet entirely an island. The water, calm as the water in a pond, almost comes over the stone roadway, whose smooth brown surface has the same worn look as that of the nearby rocks. Delicate mossy algae, half bleached by the sun, stain the roadway with greenish spots — the proof that it is subjected to frequent, prolonged immersions. At the other end of the jetty, as on this side, the paved surface rises imperceptibly to meet the dirt road that cuts across the little island; but, on that shore, the road stays quite flat afterward, and meets the jetty at an almost insignificant angle. Although there is no embankment to justify its presence, a retaining wall — symmetrical to the one on this shore — nevertheless protects the left side of the road, from the beginning of the slope to the upper limit of the sand beach — where beach stones of various sizes give way to brush underwood. On the island the vegetation seems even more desiccated than the dusty, yellowed plants that lie about us here.⁶

⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'The Wrong Direction' in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.15.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'The Way Back' in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.20.

The Way Back written by Robbe-Grillet in 1954 tells of an attempt to return home after a circular walk around an island — both directional change and a reversal in the surrounding landscape again confuse. The presence of the still and glass-like surface of the water creates another impenetrable surface to the scene. This water acts again as an insistence on surface — shining and stubborn, denying any possibility of escape to depth. Having come full circle, the way back suddenly becomes uncertain and obstructed, impossible and unfamiliar. Being a circular walk the way back could equally be in either direction. Detailed geographical and directional descriptions only add to the confusion, as do the shifting tenses, perspectives and positions of the narrator. These details are then repeated with added embellishment but to no avail — it seems that the way back is impossible; it is visually unclear and impenetrable. The repeated statement: ‘*We won’t be able to get back*’ follows and as they attempt to progress, everything is defined in negative: what can’t be done, what can’t be seen. Even the boatman they eventually meet decides to face the wrong direction and row backwards against the still but strong water. The final attempt to cross the still surface results in extreme effort being expended in order to stay in the same place. Again description is not accurate — does not belie truth. The still water is also turbulent and strong, it resists as much as it insists upon forming an impediment: ‘*It even seemed to us, after a time, that all his energy was being spent merely to keep us motionless at the same place.*’⁷ The deaf sailor, rowing in spite of the current does not respond.

All of this action goes towards an affirmation of the impenetrable nature of the surface of the image. The surface of the water becomes a current that pushes upwards and out towards me, the viewer, keeping me in my place — only to observe the description of unfolding events. This occurs across the surface of the image that operates like a mirror and evokes the photograph — an infinitely reversible space. It seems as if the experience of being within or on the other side of the image is being conveyed, that the space of the image is something to be entered and transformed by being.

But at regular intervals, a quick wave, always the same, originating a few yards from the shore, suddenly rises and immediately breaks, always along the same line. The water does not seem to move forward, and then rush back, it is rather as if the whole movement occurred in a stationary position. The swelling of the water produces first a shallow trough, along the side next to the shore, and the wave draws back slightly, with a rustling noise of gravel rolling; then it bursts and spreads milkily over the slope of the beach’s edge, but only to recover the space, which it had lost. At most, a stronger surge rises, here and there, to moisten for a moment, a few extra inches of sand.

*And all is again motionless, the sea, flat and blue, stationary at precisely the same height on the yellow sand of the beach, on which the three children walk side by side.*⁸

⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘The Way Back’ in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.27.

⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘The Way Back’ in *Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.40.

In *Shore* we are again on a point of separation — an unstable place between land and sea along which three children walk and break the long and empty shoreline. The sea is again calm without a hint of swell (something that is later contradicted). The description evokes and contradicts, inversely reminiscent of the passages that puncture the narrative all the way through Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and inject the space of the sea and the sun into the structure of the book — which rises further each time and eventually falls following a saturated and painterly vision:

*The Sun rose higher. Blue waves, green waves swept a quick fan over the beach, circling the spike of sea holly and leaving shallow pools of light here and there on the sand. A faint black rim was left behind them. The rocks which had been misty and soft hardened and were marked with red clefts ... Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid. Meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling on the shore.*⁹

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Granada Publishing, 1979) p.19.

Instead of marking a different kind of time within the narrative, Robbe-Grillet's scene unfolds in response to a negative, a lack: *'There is not a single cloud in the sky, nor is there any wind... The water does not seem to move forward, and then rush back; it is rather as if the whole movement occurred in a stationary position'*.¹⁰ Again, there is an insistence on stillness. A strange insistence in relation to a description of the sea — the moving mass — unless from the perspective of a still image. *'All again is motionless, the sea, flat and blue, stationary at precisely the same height on the yellow sand of the beach, on which the three children walk side by side.'*¹¹

The three children, described as one, progress our eyes through the scene. They do not open up the scene from their perspective or animate it; they simply move us through providing a visual focal point. Then, with the flight of disturbed birds and the ringing of a bell, movement and sound invade the scene. The sea and shore resonate with their own particular noises — the bell unleashes sound, gravel is sucked in and waves unfurl. This process repeats itself, becoming repetition but not progress, the children don't seem to move forward in time as the insistent dominance of stillness impedes their progress. The quiet surface forms a fixidity of image and traps the unfolding narrative within itself.

' "We weren't as near before" says the girl.

After a moment, the taller of the two boys, the one next to the cliff, says:

"We still aren't near."

*All three walk on in silence.'*¹²

*'Other animals flee as man approaches
But only to dive into the closest burrow.
As for me, the line I inscribe on the album
of the skies,
Before it fades, holds in prolonged attention
An eye that's anxious not to lose me in the
cloud's cross hatching.'*¹³

¹⁰ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Way Back, from Snapshots*, trans. Bruce Morissette (Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.40.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹³ Francis Ponge, *Mute Objects of Expression* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2008) p.32.

They reach the birds again that continually fly, only to land in their path waiting for a replay, as does the motion of the sea: *'On the right, near the edge of the motionless, flat water, and always at the same spot, the same small wave wells up and breaks.'*¹⁴

The languages of representation and spectacle infuse and determine each of these narratives creating a strange space between word and image. I am drawn to the struggle to construct these scenes in my mind: either as image, or as narrative event. It seems that the presence of the image operates as a device to show the complexity of depiction through words. In this awkward space I encounter the author, the subject and myself across from each other. I am made aware of my position in relation to these others. It seems, from this vantage point, that the image exists as a space between us.

'Nor does it matter in what part of it you stand: wherever a man takes his place it stretches always boundless, infinite.'¹⁵

THE LIMITS OF DESCRIPTION

In these examples we reach the limits of descriptions. The insistence on the visual, on the interrogation of surface rather than depth and on the distorting, reversing or mirroring nature of description all refer directly to the photographic process. Phenomenon is all; the object through description is drained and emptied out, used up, leaving us with an exhausted image. Roland Barthes reflects on Robbe-Grillet's construction of the image in his essay: *Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet*¹⁶. He begins by asserting optical presence through a definition of the word objective.¹⁷ This foregrounds processes of observation and optics, which involve exchange and transmission. He goes on to reflect on the way Robbe-Grillet describes objects, how they are often mirrored and reversed, acknowledging the distorting tendency of representation; a distortion of surface rather than of depth. He maintains that Robbe-Grillet does not attempt to penetrate surface rather to present language as: *'A progression of names over a surface, a patient unfolding that will gradually 'paint' the object... Robbe-Grillet requires only one mode of perception, the sense of sight. For him the object is... merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance.'*¹⁸

14 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p.45.

15 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Ronald Melville (Oxford University Press, 1997) p.30.

16 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels, Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

17 Objective n. In Optics, the lens situates nearest the object to be observed and receiving the rays of light directly from it, Oxford English Dictionary.

18 Alain Robbe-Grillet *Two Novels, Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p.12.

Barthes refers to this ‘using up’ as an establishing of limits, ‘forcibly determining the boundaries of a thing, not searching for what lies beyond it.’¹⁹ The establishing of limits is again optical — the framing of a surface to be observed. Barthes points out that this optical presence and resistance enables the object to exceed function, to move beyond function and develop another kind of significance. ‘*At the very moment we expect the author’s interest to lapse...that interest persists, insists, bringing the narrative to a sudden, untimely halt and transforming a simple implement into space, only its optical extension is real — its humanity begins where its function leaves off...*’²⁰ Great significance is given to surface, and this is given not at the expense of depth, but in spite of it. What draws me to this work is this insistence that reaches beyond the normal conduct of words into another realm, showing its own limits and moving towards the limits of the image.

‘Each of its forms has a particular speed; each responds with a particular sound. The whole lives as intensely as a complicated mechanism, as precise as it is chancy a clockwork whose spring is the weight of a given mass of precipitate vapour.’²¹

Robbe-Grillet’s writing insists on the visual. Yet it is not through establishing an opposition between the relation of subject and object, or surface and depth. The visual is constituted in the simultaneous relation between these things. The only use of metaphor that Roland Barthes can think of in Robbe-Grillet’s work is in the statement: ‘*I want a very soft eraser*’ — metaphor used to describe an object that extinguishes the visual. In its turn, the descriptive process destroys metaphor and adjective and re-positions the object in situational or spatial terms. This is where Barthes relates Robbe-Grillet to the practice of painting, although it is photography and its indexical relation to description that I am considering. Barthes speaks about modern painting as opposed to classical painting in Robbe-Grillet’s radical approach that enables a stark spatial transformation to occur: ‘*a simultaneous “reading” of the planes and perspectives of its object, thereby restoring the object to its “essential bareness”*’²²

According to Barthes’ reading, the object is positioned in space. The substance of the object is destroyed in order to insert it into the dialectic of space, not a Euclidian static space but a dynamic confused space of resistance. This space, which may be refracted, reflected or reversed, sets into motion confusion in the relationship between the object, the reader and the writer — positions that become interchangeable and unclear. This reversibility imagined through words establishes the image as a place of exchange and one in which the dynamics and direction of exchange is unstable. Barthes again sees this in relation to modern painting where the dynamics of space: ‘*set themselves in motion spatially, the object is released without losing sight of its earlier positions, and somehow, for a moment, exists in depth without ceasing to be merely flat.*’²³ I see it in relation to a view of the image as a space of exchange and otherness.

19 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p.14.

20 Ibid., p.15.

21 Francis Ponge, *Rain*, in *Unfinished Ode to Mud*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (London: CB Editions, 2008) p.3.

22 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p.17.

23 Ibid., p.18

Robbe-Grillet's creation of shifting and simultaneous spaces could be seen to refer to the relationship between still and moving image or the relationship between image and sound; it is a coupling of processes that creates an uncertain ground, disturbing familiar processes of reading. In the light of this constructed uncertainty Robbe-Grillet insists on articulating an intense specificity of location, an extreme detail of description that sets its uncertainty against a background of specificity, which, through the classical language of spatial orientation increases the oblivion: *'It is a difference of a situational or spatial order — what was on the right, for example, is now on the left: Time dislocates space, arranging the object like a series of slices that almost completely cover one another...'*²⁴

In *Snapshots* this refraction of space and combination of stillness within movement of both subject matter and narrative is continually present. Objects move without movement having taken place, the children walk along the beach but their footprints remain clear, the progress established through the narrative is undermined by the descriptive repetition of the flight of disturbed birds landing just in front. These repeated, inverted and mirrored scenes are distinctly photographic. Barthes ends his essay by comparing this method of writing to the relationship between new physics and cinema — a reaction to the history of narrative that leaps from depth to surface: *'The novel is no longer a chthonian revelation, the book of hell, but of the earth — requiring that we no longer look at the world with the eyes of a confessor, of a doctor, or of God himself... but with the eyes of a man walking in his city with no other horizon than the scene before him, no other power than that of his own eyes.'*²⁵ This seems a significant conclusion. What is being asserted is the empirical experience of space and time and the possibilities of communication. The means of this communication lies in the relationship between two processes: that of writing and the image.

AN ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE

I end by making a series of photographs and descriptions of piles of discarded plant matter taken in a local allotment. I use these structures to think about the possibility of constructing an image.²⁶ The various piles of discarded organic matter seemed to me to be an example of construction, a by-product of growth often unconsidered but strangely eloquent. I photographed heaps and piles — all the time considering the point at which a pile became a pile, and when it might be called a heap. They are private and humble but also strangely permanent in that they settle and subdue over time either to become compost or covering mulch for the ground. There is a sense of use in them. They are fiercely individual and yet also strikingly silent and so I wanted to try to bring words and description to these constructions, to give them voice. They are informed by my reading of Alain Robbe-Grillet and also by the prose poems of Francis Ponge, in particular his pieces on vegetation. These pieces take me back to where I began this cycle of enquiry, looking for a place where an image might happen, where I might consider the image as a space of encounter. They aim to present the image as a space that is both exhausted and full of possibility.

²⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels: Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, introductions by Roland Barthes, Bruce Morissette and Anne Minor, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p.21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁶ 'The element has no form containing it, it is content without form. Or rather it has but a side: the surface of the sea and of the field, the edge of the wind; the medium upon which this side takes form is not comprised of things. It unfolds in its own dimension: depth, which is inconvertible to the breadth and length in which the side of the elemental extends'. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011) p.131.



A Heap.

There is a heap in the centre of the image. It is composed of a minor abundance of leaves and grass. It is assembled; gathered. There is a hole in the middle, a dark point around which the strands of grass and other matter arrange themselves. It could be called a heap, or a small pile, or an entanglement. From a central point a mass of mid-grey thistles emerge, hard to see, partially hidden, woven with the grass binding the pile together. Over and above this complex and striated form the grass intersects with itself, turning angles, bending, crossing and connecting with other pieces. These crossings form triangular shapes and long directional sweeps leading out from the dark centre to other areas of darkness at the edges. These seeming voids build the heap around them. Looking into them other shapes can be discerned, the texture of a crumpled fern and the mud of the ground, beyond which no more is revealed. In the lower part of the image, centrally placed but slightly to the right a body of dried leaves branch out from the stem of a withered plant. It seems to function as a kind of prop, supporting grasses, leaves and thistles, enabling them to come together and take shape. The leaves look prickly and curve around and backwards on themselves to give a dry, crisp complexity. The veins on the leaves are prominent, tracing their surface towards the darkness of their underside beneath which the intersections of grasses and ground begin again. There is a sense of direction; the heap has been drawn together. Some intervention has occurred although it is difficult to define where it begins, as elements that form it lead off into other areas. In contrast, beyond its dimensions, earth, grass and stones occupy their own position.



A Pile.

There is a pile in the centre of the image. It forms a simultaneously circular and triangular structure emerging from the ground and rising to a peak. The middle of the pile has a concave shape with elements intersecting and weaving around one another. Within this space there is an entangled knot of leaves and grasses that form together obscuring their singular identity. A slender strand of grass crosses through and out to the left-hand side passing behind a long grey branch and away from the body of the pile. It tapers into a fine collection of seeds that set off from the stem in varied directions tilting one way and another, dissecting occasionally. Counterbalancing the grey branch another grey stick interjects on the right hand side projecting forwards from back to front and curving inwards slightly. It gives depth and scale to the pile whilst also demarcating its limits. From the centre various kinds of sticks and grasses entwine around each other, some brittle and broken and others supple and curving. In the foreground and slightly to the left a leaf sits proud of the pile, it is alive and fresh with markings. It forms into three parts each perpendicular to the next and the soft mid-grey tone of its surface sets it apart from the contrasts of dried grass and leaves beneath it. The edges of the pile are formed by a body of grasses combining together to encase the other matter in a skein-like surface. They twist around and then fall downwards towards the foreground. Around the edges living leaves and brambles grow.



A Mass.

There is a mass in the centre of the image. It is composed of a combination of thistles, leaves and grasses. It gathers itself around an articulation of stems that interweave about a dark central form. This form recedes into a depth beyond the ground of the image. The texture of the matter appears dry and brittle. The shapes of the leaves and stems fan outwards in twisted interpellations away from the centre. Between the stems an intense darkness obscures any further detail. Scattered throughout the body of the mass are round, soft seed-heads, which are formed into circular spheres that attach to a stem. From the stem extends the orb of thistle down. The down is constituted by an abundance of seeds that will disperse in the wind. The seed heads are concentrated towards the bottom right side of the image forming a small constellation. They are woven between grasses, stalks and leaves. The weaving helps to form the structure of the mass that rises upwards from the ground. At the bottom of the image long, light coloured stems project downwards in straight lines and curves towards the edges and out of the frame. This leads the eye outwards and back in again and then off in different directions. An oscillation occurs between the centre and the periphery, between the surface and the ground of the image. The eye is unsettled. At the bottom left corner are a collection of different seed heads, they are smaller, with pointed tops, their seeds contained on the inside. Towards the top space recedes, creating a sense of distance. The focus becomes blurred. Stems form the perimeter of the mass and define its edges. It is circular in shape. Its convexity is undermined by the darkness of the centre into which the image falls.



A Collection.

A collection of plant matter forms the body of the image. It opens into the foreground, consisting of grasses, flowers and leaves that interweave around a dark central void creating a dilapidated construction. The construction surrounds an involute mass out of which the stems and leaves emerge. Towards the middle of the central cavity a dry stalk protrudes sharply and then breaks off, dropping down at a right angle between other grasses and flower heads to curve back and weave into the space between the stems and disappear. At various points seeds and fine stems cross or touch the stalk. Dry leaves fold over the top and obfuscate the view. Next to this loose angle a round allium head also projects forwards with an intense spherical force. The texture of the seeds draws the eye into a convoluted surface beneath which lies a pattern of deep black. Resting above and beyond the seed head sits a range of equally abundant elongated projections of flowers that shape the structure of grasses and leaves, twisting and diminishing into the middle ground. In the bottom left corner supple grasses fall downwards leading the eye out of the frame in a cascade. A line of stems direct the eye back again through the repetition of a series of smaller and more dispersed seed heads that interpolate at various depths of ground amidst the darkness. This leads the direction of the eye up towards larger stems that form a small ridge projecting backwards into the middle distance where the tangle of positive and negative spaces obscure any single entity. In the top right corner of the image a mid-sized rectangular shape and the curve of a wheel provide a brief moment of resolution before the uncertainty of the collection takes hold again. A capillary system of tiny grasses entangle and weave their way around, binding the construction together.



A Skein

The image is composed of an interwoven skein of grasses, leaves and seeds. They twist and wind from the bottom upwards. Stems interpolate and interject leading the eye in undulating directions over and under. There is a sense of constant movement and diversion around where the form begins and ends. The woven matter forms a slight ridge towards the top that gives dimension to the otherwise formless expansion of connections. Around the edges of the ridge the ground becomes blurred, suggesting the approach of a more distant space. Some cardboard encroaches at the top right corner exposing a deep shadow beneath. The detail of the grasses catch the eye as leaves and stems from within the darkness lead quickly back towards the complexity of the skein. It appears to be simultaneously all surface and all depth. Dark recesses within the matter shine outwards exposing internal dimensions. From within the darkness the qualities of visible forms can be seen: the tapering end of a piece of grass, the detail of a seed or the curved edge of a leaf. Larger and more substantial stems, in various tones of grey, merge and then lead off marking directions through the skein. Apart from the cardboard corner the main focus of the image is constituted by two large, round allium seed heads in flower that lie on the surface. They are prone and inclining towards each other, as if in conversation. A few threads of grass trespass over their surface. One head looks upwards towards the light source, the other faces down, the stem twisted and damaged. Light falls on the bright texture of the flowered orbs. They each provide a moment of stasis before the complexity of the skein insists on motion once more.

CONCLUSION (A STORY)

I have engaged in a process of questioning the photograph and its ability to constitute a space of encounter between beings and between word and image. I have brought together a series of experiments in writing, reading and photography that consider the photograph as a common space. I propose that research as a process is radically uncertain, that radical uncertainty requires description and that description is necessary as a state of being.

I am looking out of the window. A flock of six bright green parakeets have flown and landed on the bare branches of the trees and in the deep green leaves of a large holly bush. Their green bodies and bright orange beaks are remarkable against the green brown of the twisted branches, the true green grass and the mottled blue-grey of the sky. They are calling out to each other and frequently moving between branches. Their movements are exaggerated by the distortion of the old glass window through which I look. Beyond the green bodies of the birds is the park and beyond the park is the town, but for now my eyes are brought resolutely back to the foreground and the movement of the birds. I come back again to the same place, the same view, but instead of seeing the birds I hear them. They are hidden by the green of the leaves that have grown in the time between then and now.

I began sitting on a bench in a public park, opposite a dustbin with a crow resting on the grass. Behind the crow was a tree in leaf and behind the tree was a man running to the right. I wanted to write in the place of a photograph, to describe a missed moment of encounter through expanded attention and concentration, to expose the limits of description in photographs and in writing. I think back to this writing and the time it took, long periods spent sitting, looking and waiting for an image to happen. I still occasionally recognize figures from my descriptions whilst walking in the park and consider going back again to look and to write.

I moved into the street seeking a place from which to photograph passers by. I decided on a location outside the supermarket Iceland on my local high street in Brixton, opposite a particularly weathered blank wall. The blank wall has now been filled with a large advertisement. I made many series of photographs choosing different combinations with which to trigger the moment to release the shutter, always in black and white and in sequences of 12 exposures, enough for variation, but also providing a level of containment, a line, a visual sentence. I worked in a combinatorial manner gaining a sensibility for the task, carefully balancing my relation to the camera and the passers by so that we might be equally exposed through the release of the shutter, so that something of our relation may be seen. The photographs grew in their precision and orchestration; a visual syntax developed absorbing my thinking about the photograph as a site of writing and a space between beings.

Whilst making the photographs I drew them, wrote them and spoke them, extensive descriptions attempting to exhaust the possibilities of the image in order to find something within them of the relations between us all. I developed these processes in order to slow down the space of viewing, to spend time with

the image, extensive time, duration — to work towards an intimacy in the surface of the photograph — to remake the image in words. I made recordings of these descriptions, spoken initially by me and then by John, a voice, borrowed as a way of taking the words outwards, but also as a way of listening. Through voice it is possible to hold the surface of the photograph. A voice, unfamiliar with the words spoken and the image described, could show the distance between word and image and hold them apart. The relation between word and image in the project finds its place in the space of the voice — but a voice removed, not my voice, or your voice — a voice that holds our encounter, our separation.

I look at Walker Evans' Labor Anonymous series as a way of considering the photograph as an anonymous space and the particular nature and quality of that space. I describe them in short fragmented pieces, playing with pronouns to explore a sense of distance and intimacy. I encounter all of the figures in his archive and look closely at details of their bodies and clothing, looking for a relation. These encounters interweave with my photographs and with details of figures seen whilst walking and passing others in daily life. Fragments continue to re-surface. My presentation of this work enables photographs previously unseen to forge a relation between past practice and present, opening up the archive again to human encounter. As such I contribute to contemporary methods of representing human encounter and also to thinking about how an archive can be made present through photographic practice and writing.

I end with a series of exhausted constructions, found in pieces of common land: discarded piles of matter that grow and shrink over the year as a result of small scale but intensive labor. They are expressive, insistent and discarded; they are the remainders of a body's attempt to produce and to construct. Through these works the writing demands something of the photographic image, it saturates and stills. This takes me back to where I started — looking for a site where an image might take place, thinking about how an image can be made. What I have shown is a sense of the image as an exhausted site through the photographic image exposed to processes of description, observation and encounter.

My conclusion lies in stating that there is more than one face to thought, and I present the project in such a way as there are multiple faces to it. What is present in the body of the writing is presented elsewhere as another face — what is read can be heard, what is written, can be seen. This gives expression to my reading of Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological writing and particularly his thinking about the face of encounter in relation to the face of things. This equivalence is essential to my reading of the photograph as a space between beings and between word and image. It also characterizes my consideration of practice led research as essentially unsettled and uncertain. This uncertainty finds its voice in a practice of description, an insistence on going back repeatedly to the surface of things, to look and to write, as a state of being and a way to make meaning.

In the face of uncertainty what is certain is the necessity of human encounter alongside a carefully articulated form of description that seeks out what is pertinent and shifts and searches accordingly. Here words and images exist alongside each other, exerting a force upon each other that can be described as radically passive, together — apart. In this site of passivity writing and photography open up an anonymous space, a space of commonality, an inclusive space. This is my contribution.

'Now I must stop; this thought of signs
disappearing makes me
reflect on the defects of a style that leans too
heavily on words.
Delighted nonetheless to have lighted upon the
pebble for a start:
for although a man of wit may smile, he must
still be touched when my critics say: 'Having
embarked upon a description of stone, he got
dragged down.'¹

¹ Francis Ponge, 'The Pebble', in *Unfinished ode to Mud*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (London: C.B. Editions, 2008) p.33.

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SARTRE IN THE PARK

Views From Park Benches 1
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007, p.12.



Photographs of Figures 1 – 6
Brockwell Park, London,
medium format black & white
photograph, 2007, p.24 – 26.



Views from Park Benches 2 – 11
Brockwell Park, London, colour
photograph, 2007, p.28 – 30.



Views from Park Benches 12 – 18
Brockwell Park, London, colour
photograph, 2007, p.31 – 32.



Views from Park Benches 19 – 26
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007,
p.34 – 35.



Views from Park Benches 27
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007, p.36.



Views from Park Benches 28
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007, p.40.



Views from Park Benches 29
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007, p.42.



Views from Park Benches 30 – 31
Brockwell Park, London,
colour photograph, 2007,
p.45 – 46.



CHARLES' HAT

Man wearing hat and suspenders with field in the background, Hale County?, Alabama, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1936, p.50.



Passers by, Alexanderplatz 1 – 8 Berlin. 35mm black and white reversal film, 2007, p.60.



Passers by, outside Iceland (circle) 1 – 8 Brixton. 35mm black and white reversal film, 2010, p.61.



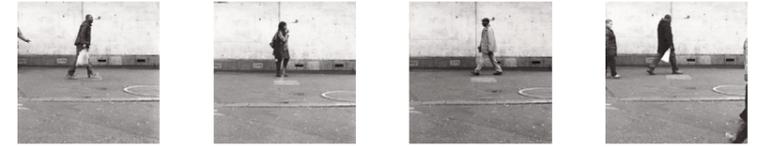
Passers by, outside Iceland (shadow) 1 – 8 Brixton, 35mm black and white reversal film, 2010, p.62.



Passers by, outside Iceland (feet) 1 – 6 Brixton, medium format black and white photograph, 2011, p.63.



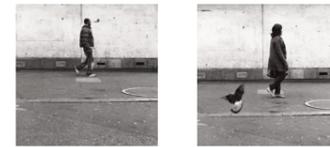
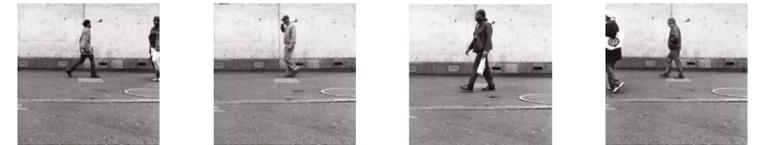
Passers by, outside Boots (mancover) 1 – 6 Brixton, medium format black and white photographs, 2010, p.64.



Passers by, outside Boots (mancover) 2 – 12 Brixton, medium format black and white photographs, 2010, p.65.



Passers by, outside Boots (mancover) 13 – 18 Brixton, medium format black and white photographs, 2010, p.66.



Passers by, outside Iceland, 1 – 12 Brixton, 35mm black and white reversal film, 2008, p.68 – 79.



Passer by, outside Iceland (circle) 9 Brixton, 35mm black and white reversal film, 2010, p.84.



LABOR ANONYMOUS

Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, published in Fortune Magazine, November 1946, p.95 – 96.



Detail from Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, published in Fortune Magazine, November 1946, p.97.



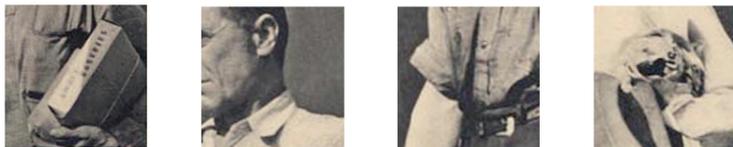
Detail from Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, published in Fortune Magazine, November 1946, p.98.



From the Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 76 p.99.



Details from Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, published in Fortune Magazine, November 1946, p.104 – 114.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 76 p.115.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 104 p.142.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 81 p.116.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 35 p.144.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 73 p.118.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 11 p.128.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 143 p.130.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 38 p.134.



From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 40 p.136.

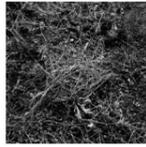


From Labor Anonymous, Walker Evans, The Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1946, No. 134 p.139.



A HEAP, A PILE, A MASS

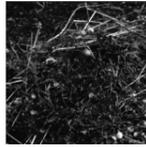
A Heap, medium format,
black and white photograph,
2009 p.164.



A Pile, medium format,
black and white photograph,
2009 p.166.



A Mass, medium format,
black and white photograph,
2009 p.168.



A Collection, medium format,
black and white photograph,
2009 p.170.



A Skein, medium format,
black and white photograph,
2009 p.172.

